

MARKO UIBU

Religiosity as Cultural Toolbox:
A Study of Estonian New Spirituality



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LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

This thesis is based on original publications that are referred to in the text as:

Study I. Rimmel, A. and M. Uibu 2015. Outside Conventional Forms: Religion and Non-Religion in Estonia. *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe* 8(1), 5–20.

Study II. Uibu, M. 2016. Re-Emerging Religiosity: The Mainstreaming of the New Spirituality in Estonia. *Journal of Baltic Studies* 47(2), 257–274.

Study III. Uibu, M. 2012. Võitlus teaduse nimel: Skeptilise aktivismi kujunemine, retoorilised võtted ning eesmärgid [The battle for science: the formation, rhetorical tools, and aims of sceptical activism]. *Ajalooline ajakiri* 3/4(141/142), 337–357.

Study IV. Uibu, M. 2015. Elu tõelise olemuse tunnetamine, moodsa aja religioon või umbluu – Uue vaimsuse erinevad nimetamis- ja käsitusviisid Eestis [Sensing the True Being, Modern Religion or Nonsense: Naming and Understanding of New Spirituality in Estonia] *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri* 2(69), 99–121.

Study V. Uibu, M. and M. Saluste 2013. Lugejate virtuaalne kogukond: Kirjandus ja ajakirjandus vaimsete-esoteeriliste ideede kandja ja levitajana [The Virtual Community of Readers: The Dissemination of Spiritual-Esoteric Ideas]. In *Mitut usku Eesti: Uue vaimsuse eri* [Multiple Faiths in Estonia: Special Issue on New Spirituality], edited by M. Uibu, 79–106. Tartu: Tartu University Press.

Study VI. Uibu, M. 2012. Creating Meanings and Supportive Networks on the Spiritual Internet Forum “The Nest of Angels”. *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics*, 6(2), 69–86.

Study VII. Uibu, M. 2016. Hidden Religiosity in One of the World’s Least Religious Countries: Estonian Doctor Luule Viilma and Her Spiritual Teachings. *Implicit Religion*, forthcoming.

Study VIII. Uibu, M. 2015. Keha tähenduse ja rolli muutumine: käsitlused eesti uue vaimsuse õpetustes ja nende järgijate seas [The Roles and Meanings of the Body in Estonian Spiritual Teachings]. *Mäetagused. Elektrooniline ajakiri*, 59, 7–26.

In Study I, both authors contributed equally. The research questions and findings were developed in dialogue.

Study V is based on the interview material collected by both authors. The interviews with library users and the data about library loans represent the work of my co-author; otherwise, the theory and analysis are my contribution.

Studies II, III, IV, VI, VII, and VIII have single authorship: I defined the research questions, conducted the studies, interpreted the results, and drew the conclusions.

INTRODUCTION

Religiosity in secular Western countries is increasingly located outside conventional religious institutions, taking mostly non-institutional, hybrid and disguised forms. Religion has become explicitly a matter of free and subjective choice: instead of living the “life-as-religion” prescribed by religious doctrines, people prefer the freedom to discover their own “subjective-life spiritualities” (Heelas et al 2004).

The analytic understanding of contemporary religion has proven as challenging a task for the scholars that non-conventional forms of religion have commonly remained understudied (Woodhead 2010). Given the high number of people who are “neither religious nor completely unreligious” (Voas 2009: 155), scholars have to find new concepts and models fit for the study of this elusive phenomena and broaden their approach to religion. Although religion has always been very diverse in terms of the ways in which people practiced it, the declining power of religious institutions and the difficulties to approach it through common indicators such as beliefs and belonging have inevitably led to an increased need to better understand religion as it is practiced in everyday contexts. The necessity to look at everyday, lived, or vernacular religion has been emphasized by several authors from different disciplines (e.g. McGuire 2008, Ammerman 2007, Bowman and Valk 2012, Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2014). Also, the increasing academic interest for spirituality to the detriment of religion could be read as an indicator of a turn to the non-conventional in religious studies. Nonetheless, spirituality as a focus for research is still considered problematic in the academia (Woodhead 2010).

My thesis focuses on a phenomenon called by many names: the New Age movement, New Age spirituality, New Spirituality, spiritual or cultic milieu. The principles, cultural origin and importance of New Age have been the focus of detailed research (see Heelas 1996, Hanegraaff 1998, Hammer 2004). There is also a growing body of studies addressing new spiritualities from participants’ perspectives (Possamai 2000, Ammerman 2007, MacKian 2012). However, considering the dynamics and variations in the modes of participation and different disciplinary view-points, there is an ongoing need for the study of the phenomenon, especially in diverse cultural contexts.

New Age-inspired spirituality is described as a “loose form of religiosity” (Hammer 2015: 372). Compared to its original 1960s counter-cultural character, the New Age movement has lost its cult-like structure and is becoming more entangled with mainstream culture and ideologies. This tendency poses another challenge for scholars of religion who are more comfortable in studying bounded and coherent movements (Woodhead 2010). Although there is some consistency in terms of its principles (Heelas 1996), spirituality itself lacks fixed core components (Hense 2013). In addition, New Agers cannot be described as a distinctive group as they do not fit into a specific profile (Rose 1998).

The structures and networks (like internet portals or spiritual training centres) for the circulation of spiritual ideas and practices can be described as a “religious/spiritual marketplace” (Roof 2001, Bowman 1999), or a “spiritual” and “cultic milieu” (Campbell 2002 [1972]). This “milieu” incorporates a wide range of alternative-spiritual ideas and practices that overlap with various other social and cultural fields. For example, health-related practices (like Luule Viilma’s teachings) are connected to the medical sphere and commonly classified under the label complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). Several spiritual and alternative teachings challenge scientific knowledge: the claims of so-called “fringe” or “alternative” science could address natural science issues but also history and archaeology (Walliss and Spencer 2003). The recently born phenomenon of “conspirituality” combines the seemingly contradicting positions of conspiracy theories and spirituality (Ward and Voas 2011). It is almost impossible to clearly detect what belongs to the spiritual milieu and what does not. Moreover, many principles and techniques from the spiritual milieu have entered the cultural mainstream (Bruce 2000). Therefore, it is not surprising that New Age has been described as one of the “most disputed categories in the study of religion in terms of agreeing content and boundaries” (Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2014: 1).

Attempts to define the field of research when it comes to contemporary spirituality tend to be problematic. Outsider conceptualizations (both academic and lay) are often based on the exclusion principle – new spirituality is an alternative to scientific knowledge or religious traditions like Christianity. A similar logic is underlying to the *emic* understandings of spiritual practitioners as well: as expressed in an online debate about spirituality hosted by the Estonian mainstream internet forum (perekoool.ee), “spirituality starts when a person does not live his full life in the mainstream”.

The nature of several spiritual ideas and practices raises the question of whether they should be approached as religious or not. The people interested in the spiritual and the esoteric whom I have studied are not necessarily religious (i.e., they do not speak of or assume the existence of a transcendent dimension) and they do not want to identify themselves as such. Many popular spiritual practices like yoga can be attended without acknowledging their spiritual dimension (van Hove 1999, Karjalainen 2012). However, despite their practical functions, spiritual and alternative teachings still usually require some sort of belief in – or in a more latent/less intensive form just the acceptance of – *the existence of some broader meta-empirical forces that could be the source of subtle non-physical energy or a broader spiritual order*. Even mundane and practically useful techniques commonly involve some degree of transcendence (Knoblauch 2008).

This thesis is taking a broader approach to **religion**, understanding it as a *cultural system that acknowledges the presence of an incomprehensible power, force or deity (which, however, does not necessarily form its explicit core)*. In this sense, my definition of religion is very similar to Wuthnow’s definition of spirituality as “a state of being related to a divine, supernatural, or transcendent

order of reality or, alternatively, as a sense or awareness of a suprareality that goes beyond life as ordinarily experienced” (2001: 307). The teachings distributed in the spiritual milieu provide people with the spiritual techniques that allow them to relate to the transcendental as well as to cultivate their sense of spiritual awareness. In its broader meaning, it could be seen as religion, although not “a religion” in the “traditional” and institutional sense (Hanegraaff 1999). However, it must be noted that my studies are not so much about *religion or spirituality per se but about analyzing the spiritual milieu as one source of cultural tools such as knowledge or practices* in a pluralistic society.

The scope of research and the operational concepts of my thesis require some clarifications, which I provide in the introductory chapter. The empirical material imposes it on me to consider the nature of religion and religiosity more generally as well as broaden the range of tools used for analyzing religious phenomena. My thesis is based on empirical material that comes from the Estonian cultural context. Nonetheless, my aim is to illustrate tendencies and offer explanations that transcend one location or cultural singularity.

The context of my studies – Estonia

According to several studies, Estonia belongs to the least religious countries in the world (Eurostat 2005, Crabtree and Pelham 2009, Pickel et al 2012), being considered a “highly secular” and “dominantly un-churched” country (Berger et al 2008, Borowik et al 2013). The studies of non-standard and non-institutional religion are especially relevant in the Estonian secular context as they provide a useful model of how spiritual-religious phenomena work. Indeed, due to historical-cultural reasons, the forms of religiosity are fluid and concealed in Estonia. However, the low level of belief in God and the minor role of institutional religion do not mean that people’s life-worlds lack a supernatural or transcendent dimension. Religiosity has just become more disguised, emerging rather under the guise of different forms of contemporary spirituality that do not use explicitly religious language. Several signs indicate the popularity of spirituality in Estonia: e.g. a rich variety of best-selling spiritual-alternative self-help books (Study V) or a busy schedule of spiritual events taking place all over the country. However, there remains a discrepancy between the high level of (mostly latent) beliefs and the practices or teachings that people have actually tried to use themselves. The number of permanent active practitioners of spiritual techniques is still small in Estonia (Altnurme 2013).

Instead of religious commitments and obligations, participation in spirituality is explicitly based on the “demand-based” and “situational” model. People tend to turn to spiritual-esoteric teachings with a specific need and in certain moments: for example, if they feel “off the track” in their lives or cannot handle crises using only non-religious/materialistic frames. Drawing on my observation of the Estonian spiritual milieu, I define more general models of participation

by identifying the main characteristics of involvement as well as the prerequisites for the existence and the efficacy of the spiritual milieu as such.

My approach in this thesis is social-scientific, taking religion as one cultural/social system that creates cultural meanings and practices. Disciplinarily, my studies could be classified as qualitative sociology and social-cultural anthropology. In this sense, I agree with Paul Heelas' claim that the Estonian example, indeed, endorses the idea that "traditional disciplinary boundaries – specifically those which revolve around 'religion' – should be relegated to history" (2013: 195). In my thesis, I use the example of the Estonian spiritual milieu to demonstrate some more universal tendencies related to religious and meaning-creating systems. The studies are methodologically diverse, mostly based on qualitative material combining methods and data sources to get a deeper insight into the phenomenon.

It has been argued (e.g. Heelas 2013) that existing theories and concepts do not grasp fully the Estonian religious situation when it comes to involvement in the spiritual milieu. Based on the empirical studies and rich corpus of literature about contemporary religious participation (e.g. Possamai 2000, MacKian 2012), I propose a model that aims to take into account the fluidity and situationality of non-institutionalized religiosity.

Research questions and aims of the thesis

In addition to the more specific sub-questions and goals of the separate publications that make up this thesis, my more general aims are the following:

- To review some possible approaches and challenges in describing religiosity in a society with dominantly post-institutional religiosities like Estonia.
- To find suitable models for involvement and participation in the context of the "fuzzy" and elusive nature of contemporary religious phenomena.
- To observe spiritual involvement from the participants' point of view. To describe how teachings and practices are validated at the individual level and how the alternative and the spiritual are legitimated at the societal level.

To meet these aims I propose several questions that my empirical studies and theoretical discussions address.

- How to conceptualize new spirituality (based on my empirical studies in Estonia)? Could it be analyzed as a coherent phenomenon?
- Why do people embrace certain explanations or techniques that the spiritual milieu offers? Why is the spiritual milieu meeting the expectations of so many Estonians?
- How do people participate in the spiritual milieu and become involved?
- How is non-institutional and syncretic spirituality distributed? What are the institutions/structures that support the existence of a spiritual milieu?

- How to understand spirituality in comparison to religions and in the context of the study of religions? What kind of implications does the phenomenon of new spirituality have for the discipline?

Obviously, most of these questions are driving on-going discussions and new empirical studies, so my data and interpretations are just one contribution to the greater debate.

The thesis is based on eight research articles published in journals and books. To tie them together, the first introductory chapter gives an overview of the context of my studies, referring to relevant sources and linking the publications. Second, I will discuss some methodological concerns and give a brief overview of my research process. The third chapter sketches out the main aspects of situational involvement and brings out the use of the term “inclinations” in describing religious-spiritual participation. In the fourth chapter I give an overview of the aspects related to the process of becoming involved and different types of validation processes that participants go through. Finally, I will summarize the main findings of both the articles and the meta-analysis presented in the introductory chapters.

1. NECESSARY CONSIDERATIONS IN THE STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

In the next sections I will review some relevant key theories, concepts, and characteristics for the study of Estonian contemporary religiosity and for my research. Many of the topics that I touch on are more thoroughly discussed in the separate studies. The first part of the chapter gives a brief overview of some key aspects of the Estonian socio-cultural and religious situation. As a second step, I summarize some main theoretical approaches to religion, discussing briefly the theories of secularization, individualization and privatization. The third and fourth sub-chapters review some key concepts (and approaches) that have been used to describe contemporary non-institutional religion and spirituality and explain my position in the thesis. Fifth, I will bring out some central elements analyzed in the studies of religion and argue that these are not easily applicable to the context of contemporary religiosity. Based on that, the last section offers some broader conceptual tools that might be useful for analyzing the milieu of new spirituality (e.g. as a “source of significance”).

1.1 Religious context of Estonia

Since religion is a culture-specific phenomenon, the location of my research undoubtedly plays a very significant role. All the studies in the thesis are based on the Estonian material. How the specific Estonian cultural context influences the conditions of contemporary religiosity is addressed most directly in Study I. Due to historical and cultural reasons, Estonia provides a great opportunity for studying spirituality and post-institutional religiosity.¹ Estonians are prominently influenced by Soviet-era anti-religious programs that cut off the transmission of religion and resulted in prevailing religious illiteracy and a low level of belonging and Christian beliefs (Study I).

Compared to the weak position of institutional religions at the end of the Soviet period, the perceived importance of religion has grown but still remains low (Saar 2012, Maasoo 2015). Estonia is probably the first country to have a minority group religion – Orthodox Christianity with 14% of followers – to become more popular than the historically and culturally dominant Lutheran church that has 10% of followers according to the last Nationwide Census in 2011 (Ringvee 2014).²

The Lutheran church and Christian beliefs do not have a strong position in Estonia. It is debatable how much we could see vicarious or cultural religion in Estonia. Although elements from Christianity are an integral part of the culture

¹ Although Estonia is a specific case, there are considerable similarities with the material coming from Germany (Knoblauch 2008), the Czech Republic (Hamplová and Nespor2009), Australia (Possamai 2000), or Sweden (af Burén 2015).

² The spiritual milieu in Estonia is language-bounded, therefore, the people who participated in my studies are Estonian-speakers.

(Altnurme 2005, 2015), these are usually not perceived as religious (see Study IV, for example). The common response to religious issues and religious connotations is often indifference or even hostility (Study IV, Rimmel 2016). Therefore, Estonia is in a different situation than the Scandinavian countries that could be seen as models for vernacular religion.³ Estonia is also considered as one of the most liberal countries regarding the freedom of religion, both in legislation and in practice (Ringvee 2008).

The Estonian example supports the claim of “widespread indifference” to institutional religions as an endpoint of secularization (Bruce 2002: 42). This “indifference” might be misleading as people are not seeking meaningful and effective religious and cultural tools less than before – without strong institutions those tools and channels are just more diverse and disguised. In an overall secular context deprived of strongly dominating religious traditions, syncretic forms of religion tend to emerge (Pollack and Müller 2006)⁴. “Fuzzy fidelity” could tip the balance towards one or another religious-spiritual tradition: in Europe the major influences come from Christianity and New Age (Voas 2009). In Estonia, individual religiosity is mostly based on New Age (Altnurme 2012). Indeed, spiritual teachings enjoy high popularity in Estonia, albeit being often disguised and difficult to identify as religious phenomena (see Studies I, II and VII).

Despite the wide use of spiritual teachings and even some signs of mainstreaming of spirituality, public understandings about spirituality have often rather negative connotations, which is related to religious indifference and the strong position of materialistic discourse (see Study II and III). Several religion-related indicators place Estonia very high on the secular-rational scale (like Inglehart and Welzel 2005). In the European comparison, Estonians are more optimistic about scientific progress and place higher value on knowledge (Study III). The perceived social position of and stigmas related to spirituality are important issues for the discussion about the efficacy of the spiritual milieu. For example, Study II points to some signs of the mainstreaming of spirituality in public discourse and gives examples of tensions between spirituality, religion, and the scientific-materialistic position; Study III looks at the direct confrontations with skeptics.

³ Despite the low level of belonging, it has been argued for the prevalence of vicarious religion in Estonia as people commonly acknowledge the cultural importance of Christianity (Altnurme 2015). Cultural religion “affords a sense of personal identity and continuity with the past even after participation in ritual and belief have lapsed” (Demerath 2000). In Estonia, this could be explicitly seen situationally, for instance when opposing the culturally and religiously “other”. The recent refugee crisis has brought out a stronger sense of Christian roots and identity for Estonians.

⁴ It does not mean that in cultures with stronger religious traditions syncretic spiritualities do not emerge. However, the patterns might be different. For example, compared to Catholic Lithuania, where New Agers position themselves in relation to the church (Ališauskienė 2012), Estonians are much less concerned with religion when it comes to spirituality. Despite Estonian religious indifference, it is still visible that spirituality is constructed in opposition to religion (see Study IV).

Sociologists have shown that characterizations of religion can be problematic in Estonia (e.g. Saar 2012). The fuzziness of the Estonian religious situation points out the need for a different type of model/approach for studying religious participation/involvement – the aims of this thesis are based on this understanding.

1.2 Some main theoretical approaches in the study of contemporary religion

Since the rise of the social sciences, the idea of religious decline in favour of science and more materialistic-rational worldviews has been prevailing (Furseth and Repstad 2006). Although authors like Marx or Weber did not directly use the term **secularization** (*ibid.*), secularization theories have developed their predictions of inevitable religious change. Secularization as one of the most dominant theories in explaining the religious situation in the West has become increasingly criticized for directing and limiting the scholars too much (Giordan 2014).

However, secularization does describe some fundamental social and cultural changes in Europe. The secular sphere has been clearly separated from religious institutions, there has been a decline in religious beliefs and practices, and religion has become mostly a private matter (Casanova 2006). However, secularization is not a linear and bounded process. Dobbelaere (2002) describes secularization taking place on three distinctive levels: societal, institutional, and individual. Those processes are themselves very different and have distinct consequences. Therefore, secularization on one level could not be necessarily correlated with secularization on another level (Dobbelaere 2002). Another problematic aspect is the ability of the theory to predict future perspectives. This is precisely the question raised in Study II: Does secularization have to result in materialism or just in the decline of the importance of institutional and conventional religion?

If secularization is understood as the decline of conventional religion, then Western and especially North-European or Post-Soviet countries easily fit the criteria of being very secular. If the aim is to understand the presence of religion or religiosity in these societies, this conclusion is in no way helpful as secularism has not meant the decline of other types of religiosities. The diminishing importance of institutional religions has created a favourable context for the emergence of several alternative forms of religiosity, including New Age spirituality. Study II argues even that a process of “mainstreaming of spirituality” is ongoing, which could be seen as supporting the de-secularization claim⁵. The tendency to have new spiritualities more visibly and widely used in society has been pointed out by several scholars under the name of “spiritual revolution”

⁵ It depends, of course, on the definition of the concept “secular” and I agree with af Burén (2015) that these debates are illustrating the problematic nature of the divide between religious and secular as such.

(Heelas et al 2005, Heelas 2013, Tacey 2004), a point which I will address directly in Study I. The empirical examples I analyze in this thesis are supporting some aspects of the secularization theory while denouncing others.

In accordance with the general principles of secularization, several approaches emphasize the **individualization of religion**. Since Luckmann's description of "invisible religion" (1967), scholars have increasingly argued that the role of religious institutions has been overthrown by individual forms of religion (Davie 1994, Bellah 2007). The emergence and growing popularity of New Age spirituality fits well with Georg Simmel's descriptions of the individualization and segmentation of beliefs. He predicted that "large social groups" who cannot find their belief in traditional doctrines to fulfil their religious needs "are turning to all sorts of exotic, far-fetched and bizarre new doctrines" (Simmel 1976 [1917]: 259).⁶ Individualism in religion is one part of the cultural process of individualization which is key for the emergence of new spirituality, being paralleled by increasing consumerism, for instance. On the other hand, individualism itself is a result of a long historical development that has been strongly influenced by religions (see Miskelly 2006).

Privatization is one element of secularization (Casanova 2006) which has assumedly lessened the public presence and importance of religion. However, the public-private divide is increasingly irrelevant nowadays. "Private" in the sense of being bounded, local and personal has started rapidly to dissolve due to the numerous channels that allow the private to become public, e.g. the social media networks (Knoblauch 2008). Privatized religion can be simultaneously public: the network society has provided plenty of channels that enable novel but coherent and functional forms of cultural transmission. This tendency contributes strongly to the proliferation of spirituality. I will discuss these network-related aspects more specifically in section 3.5 and in Studies II, V and VI.

Religious pluralization can be seen as a parallel process to individualization. Supposedly, religious pluralization is a concept that describes more accurately the contemporary religious situation than secularization (Giordan 2014). Religious pluralism refers commonly to the diversity and co-existence of different denominations and religious traditions. In the Estonian context, characterized by the absence of strong churches and religious communities, pluralism is more vividly present on an individual level in the form of syncretism of beliefs and practices (see Studies II, VI). Ann af Burén (2015) proposed the term *simultaneity* in her analysis of the Swedes' understandings of religion: her "both and" approach means that several interpretations are simultaneously used for giving meaning to religious experiences.

Pluralism and individualization provide grounding for numerous other approaches. For instance, some draw a parallel with the market, e.g. "supply models" and the concept of the religious marketplace (Roof 2001). To empha-

⁶ Many aspects of Simmel's analysis describe the New Age or other spiritual movements very well: like the notion about "purely inward spiritual condition not entailing any specific beliefs" (Simmel 1976 [1917]: 258).

size the individual's role in combining bits and pieces of different religious beliefs and practices, metaphors such as religion “à la carte” (Possamai 2003, Van Hove 1999) or “pick-and-mix religion” (Hamilton 2000) have been used. Although these concepts grasp several aspects of contemporary religiosity accurately, they tend to leave out collective and socio-cultural norms and patterns, therefore lending themselves to criticism by several scholars (Aupers and Houtman 2006, Hammer 2010). The model of participation in spirituality that I describe in this thesis is based to a great extent on acknowledging the relevance of religious individualization and pluralization processes while aiming to take into account the specific nature of religious and spiritual participation and the importance of cultural norms.

1.3 Some main approaches to non-institutional forms of religion

To clarify the approach and my thesis terminology, this sub-chapter is dedicated to the review of some key concepts of spirituality and non-institutional forms of religion. The multiplicity of concepts is due to several factors: disciplinary differences, the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon itself, but also some ideological concerns and the loadedness of the terminology. The attempts to find new terms reflect also the scholarly understanding that the term “religion” cannot grasp well enough the essence of the changing nature of religiosity. The following overview is far from being exhaustive but it brings to the fore several terms that address certain forms of the individualistic, syncretic contemporary religiosity that is the focus of this thesis.

The emerging forms of religiosity are commonly defined in opposition to religion – as something being outside or different than conventional and institutional religion. For example, the Gramsci-influenced approach to **popular religion** (Possamai 2011) is built around the contestation of the dominant religious system and culture. Similarly, **tactical religion** (Woodhead 2010) points to de Certeau's everyday tactics that are available for laymen outside of the institutional strategic domain of religion. **Alternative religions** (Hunt 2003, Stein 2000) construct the distinction between mainstream and alternative, the latter belonging to subcultural groups and representing alternatives. However, these distinctions are not very relevant in the Estonian context because the church or any religious institutions are not present as dominant authority. Although Ventsel et al. (2016) based their analysis of religiosity in Estonia on the vernacular – dominant distinction, the declining influence of religious institutions has deprived this distinction of most of its relevance (see the discussion about dominant and vernacular in section 3.5). Similarly, Knoblauch (2008) claims that, at least in the German religious case, instead of “public” and “private” there is general “popular” religion.

With increasing individualization, religion has become elusive and invisible (Luckmann 1967) and the emergence of popular new spiritualities could be seen as the part of this tendency. An increasing proportion of people who diverge

from traditional religion, but cannot be classified under the label of atheists, draw more and more the scholars' attention. A wide range of **"fuzzy fidelities"** describe people who "are neither regular churchgoers nor self-consciously non-religious" (Voas 2009: 155). In societies such as the Estonian one, the majority of individuals with their own personal religious or religion-related paths and experiences remain outside the traditional religious sphere and could be described as **non-religious** in the sense of "non-religion" denoting "phenomena that are generally not considered religious but whose significance is more or less dependent on religion." (Quack 2014, see Study I). It is important to note that being "not religious" in many cases does not mean a lack of beliefs or practices (Stark et al. 2005). Disguised structures and elements of religion have been analyzed as **"implicit religion"** (Bailey 2010). In my thesis, Study VII uses this concept to demonstrate that dr. Luule Viilma's spiritual health teachings contain elements of explicit, but more significantly, implicit religion.

Terms like **"everyday"** (Ammerman 2007), **"lived"** (Orsi 2003, McGuire 2008), or **"vernacular"** (Primiano 1995) emphasize the importance of a micro-perspective on religion and aim to describe people's practices when it comes to religion. Religion "as it is lived: as humans encounter, understand, interpret and practice it" (Primiano 1995: 44) tries to avoid reducing religion only to institutions or creed and proposes to „grasp the complexity, diversity, and fluidity of real individuals' religion-as practices, in the context of their everyday lives" (McGuire 2008: 213). These theoretical considerations (and the empirical studies based on them) have at their centre the issue of "what people *do* with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds with them, and how, in turn, men, women, and children are fundamentally shaped by the worlds they are making as they make these worlds" (Orsi 2003: 172).

"Vernacular religion" as popular, dynamic, complex and fluid is not strictly characteristic of contemporary religiosity but has always been an integral part of lived religions (see Bowman and Valk 2012). Syncretic and non-institutional forms of religious participation are not a new phenomenon but simply off the radar for scholars who have for a long time disregarded them as insignificant (Stringer 2008). The fact that less institutionalized forms of religion have become more and more dominant in secular societies has determined scholars to turn their attention more to the syncretic and vernacular patterns. In the Estonian context of weak religious institutions and lack of control over the individual religiosities, the emphasis on "lived" religion instead of institutional is actually inevitable.⁷

⁷ There are several limitations of vernacular approaches as well. Vernacular – similarly to the common concept of individual seeking – emphasizes (often implicitly) the individual dimension. Vernacular religion does not necessarily mean original patterns based on individual decisions. Scholars of vernacular religion might fail to grasp the broader structural tendencies (which is, indeed, complicated daunting task from a methodological stand-point).

1.4 Some concepts of “new spirituality”

New Age-based spiritualities can be classified under the categories of non-religion, invisible, individual religiosity. The term “**spirituality**” is increasingly present in *emic* and *etic* usage (Study IV). Spirituality could be seen as a loose frame “in which individuals ‘pick and mix’ their religious beliefs and practices in a manner that is perfectly consistent with the fluid subjectivities of modern society” (Turner 2010: 11). Despite the very diverse range of spiritualities (Hense 2013) or belief systems and understandings that make up the category of spirituality (Hove 1999), the phenomena labelled as spirituality are still recognizable in an implicit connection similar to Wittgenstein’s family resemblance (Hense 2013, van Hove 1999). However, the term spirituality has a very broad meaning as it is found in all religions, being sometimes seen as the true core of religions – the institutional burden excluded.

Reflexive spirituality transcends specific religious traditions, being “a cultural language, a way that people talk with each other about transcendent meaning” (Besecke 2001). Reflexive spirituality is used to describe people with “a constant awareness of the ever-increasing variety of religious meanings available in the modern world”, who “seek spiritual wisdom by intentionally but critically assimilating those meanings into one’s own spiritual outlook” (Besecke 2007: 171). However, this approach remains over-intellectualist. The reflexivity could be attributed to the small minority of religious seekers – although spiritual seeking might involve interest in different religious traditions, the spiritual milieu as such is practical in nature and usually not reflexive at all.

Despite the problematic nature of the term **New Age** (see Study IV), it is still commonly used in academic works; also in combinations such as “New Age religiosity/religion” (Hammer 2015). New Age spirituality includes diverse teachings and principles, and it excludes some other “**alternative spiritualities**” derived for example from (neo)-shamanisms, or wellbeing (mind-body-spirit) cultures (Harvey and Vincett 2012). Although the notion “alternative” relies mostly on the opposition to Christianity and “institutional religions”, it accounts for the diversity of spiritualities.

The terms **secular / contemporary esotericism** (Hanegraaff 1998) emphasize – to a certain degree – the similarities between new spirituality and the esoteric traditions. The Estonian term for esotericism – *esoteerika* – is present in lay usage but it applies accurately only to some subcurrents in the spiritual milieu. There are other terms that aim to reflect some core principles of spirituality. Following the model of philosophical perennialism common to New Age (Heelas 1996), Possamai (2005, 2007) proposes the term **perennism**.

Perennism has three characteristics and is defined as a syncretic spirituality which interprets the world as monistic (the cosmos is perceived as having its elements deeply interrelated – it recognizes a single ultimate principle, being, or force, underlying all reality, and rejects the notion of dualism, e.g. between mind and body); whose actors are attempting to develop their Human Potential Ethic (actors work on themselves for personal growth); and whose actors are seeking

Spiritual Knowledge (the way to develop oneself is through a pursuit of knowledge, be it the knowledge of the universe or of the self, the two being inter-related). (Possamai 2007:153)

I find this description very accurate for the core principles in the spiritual milieu. However, the spiritual milieu accommodates teachings and positions that cannot be grouped with either the esoteric subcurrent or perennism. For example, there are practical mind-body-spirit techniques but also combinations such as “conspirituality” which brings together New Age spirituality and conspiracy theories (Ward and Voas 2011, Aupers 2012). Although an apparently unlikely pairing, these combinations are also empirically visible in Estonia, for instance, on the Telegram.ee news portal.

Another option is to describe the circulation of the spiritual, esoteric, and conspiritual in a given environment or milieu, where different traditions can mingle and compete. Several popular concepts such as spiritual/cultic milieu and market-related concepts such as **religious** or **spiritual marketplace** (e.g. Roof 2001) help to avoid the challenge to define spirituality based on some core principles. Bowman (1999:188) has proposed the term “spiritual service industry” where “consumer choice has progressed from the ‘corner shop’ of resources previously available to the healing ‘hypermarket’ which is now such an important part of the spiritual marketplace”. To indicate the centrality of experiencing transcendence, the concept of “market of transcendence” refers to a market where Christian denominations compete with other religious orientations on various levels and forms of transcendence (Luckman 1990). In post-socialist contexts, the concept of “religious marketplace” has been related to religious freedom and the plurality of “new” religions that followed the Soviet period (Pelkmans 2009). However, parallels to consumption and the market can be misleading and should be used carefully – it can be a fine metaphor but not a model that accurately describes the functioning of the spiritual field.

Stark and Bainbrige’s (1985: 26) notion of “**client cults**” combines the logic of spiritual services with some cultic (religious-spiritual) elements. The concept grasps well some brief and situational encounters common in the spiritual milieu: consulting astrologists, dowisers, healers, etc. Campbell’s (2002[1972]) **cultic milieu** refers to alternative (and seemingly deviant) beliefs and practices in the margins of different spheres of life such as science (pseudo-scientific pursuits), health (alternative medicine, spiritual healing), mysticism, conspiracy theories etc. Although Campbell’s approach is useful and still describes well the general functioning of the milieu, there are some problematic aspects to it (see section 4.3). Since “cult” both has and creates negative connotations in English as well as in Estonian, alternative terms such as “**holistic milieu**” (Heelas et al. 2005) could be better.

To sum up and state **my position in this thesis**: I prefer the terms that refer to spirituality as an environment or milieu (*keskkond* or *miljö* in Estonian). However, I have also used the terms New Spirituality, spirituality, New Age spirituality and contemporary spiritualities. The question raised by my overview

is: How should scholars conceptualize spirituality (if at all)? Based on an analysis of Estonian spiritual practitioners, Study IV concludes that it is very difficult if not impossible to find an accurate term from everyday language that would not have unwanted extra meanings.

I have addressed the question of naming in my studies from different perspectives. Study IV is most directly dedicated to the naming of the phenomenon, analysing empirical material about *emic* conceptualizations. Study III points out some tactics and pejorative terms used by skeptics to diminish the perceived acceptability/legitimacy of spiritual solutions. For example, I describe skeptics' strategies to create and reinforce boundaries through naming, which is in direct conflict with the ideas of the spiritual practitioners who tend to see spirituality as all-encompassing. The general conclusion is that terminology is not a technical issue but demonstrates the contested nature of spirituality.

1.5 Belonging, beliefs and practices in the study of spirituality

The complications in the conceptualization of the spiritual milieu become clearer when looking at the commonly analyzed central elements of religions with an aim to applying them in the studies of contemporary spiritualities. It has been argued that spirituality is not fully understandable with the help of the common characteristics of religion (Wuthnow 2001, Woodhead 2010). Conventionally used indicators in the study of religions – the big “Bs” of religion: belonging, belief, and behaviour (Day 2013) – have simply lost much of their functionality in describing the modes of religiosity in highly secularized societies.

The sense of belonging to congregations and even clearly religion-related identities (Christian, atheist etc) are not relevant for people (see Study I). It is not even accurate to talk about “believing without belonging” (Davie 1994: 94). Based on the British example, Voas and Crockett suggested that instead of belief without belonging, the current situation could be characterized only by “vague willingness to suppose that ‘there’s something out there’, accompanied by an unsurprising disinclination to spend any time and effort worshipping whatever that might be” (2005: 24).⁸ It has become a great challenge to refer to something or someone as “religious” (Swatos 1998). Study I addresses these issues in the Estonian context where these tendencies are even more relevant as both institutional religion but also, surprisingly, atheism and materialism are not coherent and bounded entities.

Moreover, increasing “fuzziness of religious practice” (Voas 2009: 163) and the presence of numerous spiritual practices (like meditation) complicate even the attempts to define “religious behaviour”. Therefore, and especially with

⁸ Study I shows, for example, that beliefs have a mostly fluid and situational nature. What does it mean, for example, if a person answers in a questionnaire that he “believes” or “rather believes” in the existence of a spiritual life-force or angels-protectors? What kind of implications does this belief statement has for the respondent’s choices or practices?

people who are participating in the spiritual milieu, the big Bs are difficult to apply: one can exist without the other(s), all three aspects are simultaneously and coherently fulfilled by very few people. Several factors in Estonia, such as low visibility and little knowledge of religions, make the situation probably even more complicated (see Study I).

Study IV points out the difficulties in grouping different phenomena in the spiritual milieu under the label of religion or even religiosity as people show both value-based and practice-based involvement. The spiritual milieu incorporates practices like yoga or Reiki, which could be understood as daily exercises without a transcendent dimension. From an *emic* perspective, although supernatural *per se*, Reiki energy is rather seen as a natural and instrumentally beneficial force similar to electricity (you are using it without knowing how it works exactly). Similarly, participation in “client cults” (Stark and Bainbrige 1985) is commonly instrumental without involving any religious commitment. Spiritual techniques for everyday practical matters give “spiritual answers to mundane problems” (O’Neil 2001: 456).

Therefore, the spiritual milieu challenges the very basic dichotomy between the “secular” and the “religious”. This dichotomy has been pointed out as artificial by several scholars of contemporary religion (af Burén 2015, Orsi 2003). The fluidity and overlapping of the religious and secular categories emerges in the actual usage of spiritual teachings.

A large number of New Age “products” are offered as solutions to “secular” problems and challenges, or as means to secular goals, ambitions or interests: entertainment, health, fitness, the strengthening of job motivations, and so on, with the spiritual dimension more or less optional – for the customer to decide to build upon or to ignore.(Kraft 2014: 306)

Scholars have described a therapeutic turn and the rise of wellbeing culture, where the secular and the spiritual are indistinguishable, in mainstream spheres like standard supermarkets or book-stores (Harvey and Vincett 2012). The spiritual milieu provides a supportive environment for taking care of one’s wellbeing – in its physical, mental and/or spiritual dimensions –, increasingly blending the “alternative” with the “popular” (Harvey and Vincett 2012).

However, the spiritual milieu is not only about practical needs and mundane solutions but it holds some core values like the necessity for spiritual growth (Human Potential Ethic) or individual freedom, which resonate well with broader cultural values (see Possamai’s definition of perennism quoted on page 19–20). As Study II points out, spiritual growth has become an appealing value for the majority of Estonians: for instance, in a 2014 representative questionnaire, 67% of Estonian inhabitants agreed with the claim that “with spiritual self-development, including conscious autosuggestions and spiritual practices like meditation, I could change myself, my life, and the world around me”. So there is a high level of belief in spiritual self-development that does not entail practicing or even knowing about spiritual practices.

Table 1.

	PRACTICES +	PRACTICES -
PRINCIPLES +	1) Fully involved: people who embrace spirituality both in terms of values and practices. They use regularly solutions offered by the spiritual milieu.	2) People sympathizing with spiritual ideas like spiritual self-development: in Estonia, some spiritual beliefs and principles are widespread in the general population.
PRINCIPLES -	3) Participants with practical aims take spiritual solutions as useful instruments without interest in values and spiritual guidance.	4) Outsiders: could be just indifferent or have no contact with spirituality. Small group of people with clearly negative attitudes (e.g. the skeptics).

Table 1 shows the many forms of being involved in or just influenced by spirituality based on practices, activities or principles, beliefs, values. It also shows that practices can exist without deeper beliefs and vice versa. Based on this classification, it is possible to describe some “ideal types”. People who share some beliefs in the efficacy of spiritual-alternative solutions or who put some value on spiritual self-development, for example, might have never actually used any techniques (group no. 2). On the contrary, some users of the techniques or expertise (for example, using dowsing rods to detect a location for a new well) do not actually have to hold any of the central principles such as spiritual self-growth (group no 3). However, underlying even practical aims, there is always some degree of belief in the supernatural; people have to accept that the energies or the principles that the solutions are based on actually exist and are effective.

1.6 Widening the perspective: religion as a cultural resource

Several scholars (like Dobbelaere 2002, Heelas 2013) have pointed out the necessity to widen the focus of the studies of religions and religiosity. Starting from an understanding of religious pluralism as being broader than the presence of different religious traditions, Dobbelaere (2002: 195) suggests that “instead of measuring only *religious* pluralism, researchers should measure the impact of competing *meaning systems* – religious, a-religious and anti-religious – on the behaviour, the opinions and attitudes of the individuals”. This suggestion is very relevant in the context of spirituality given that syncretic forms of new spiritualities take elements from different religious and cultural sources. While analyzing individual religiosities in Estonia, Altnurme (2012: 193) argued that a great proportion of influences for individual religiosities do not have religious

origins but could be taken from science, education or medicine and then easily assembled into New-Age-based individual religions – often without explicit reference to the sacred or transcendence.

Scholars of religion still tend to focus on religion *per se*, although religion could and should be rather seen as one cultural system among others. It is not fruitful to approach spirituality as an individualistic phenomenon but rather as a *cultural resource* (Besecke 2001). Drawing on Ann Swidler's (1986) description of culture as a "tool-kit", the spiritual milieu could be seen as one cultural resource that offers various tools: representations/ meanings, values, techniques, practices, etc. Cultural explanations for illnesses or other obstacles thus become cultural tools, and the same applies to specific techniques and methods that the spiritual milieu offers (see Study VII).

Without going into a deeper discussion about the complicated interaction between culture and action (e.g. Vaisey 2008), I will simply apply the concepts of cultural tools and toolkits to the analysis of the spiritual milieu. As interesting as it might be to speculate about the underlying dynamics of different mechanisms in the process of using spiritual teachings/participating in the spiritual milieu, that would require a more focused approach. It must be noted that different cultural tools have very different functions and levels of strength as well as efficacy. For example, some social values fuel the perceived need for self-development that people try to accomplish using other cultural tools such as spiritual techniques and meanings (see Ziguras 2004). Swidler's (1986) ideas about culture resonate well with the loose participation model that I propose in this thesis in that they help to tease out the cultural belonging or at least the appropriation of the elements that the spiritual milieu as a source offers.

Meanings and meaningfulness are the main cultural tools for religions and spiritualities. According to Thomas Luckmann (1967: 49), meaning is the core of humanity as it transcends the purely biological nature of the human being. Religion in this very broad and functional approach constitutes one and very prominent meaning-creating system. From the social-psychological side, it is pointed out that finding **meaningfulness** is "a core psychological need", it is a strong desire for people "to understand themselves and the world around" (Steger et al 2001: 200). The process of finding meaningfulness is obviously not religious *per se* but has historically been the main domain of religions.⁹ Religion as a cultural tool helps to create the self by providing a "frame of reference for interpreting reality" (Luckmann 1967). Meaningfulness in this sense means something much broader than just social representations – it constitutes fundamental interpretations of situations, the very basic notion of life itself, etc.¹⁰

⁹ The construction of the self has been (and in many situations still is) a religious process as far as it helps "human beings develop their understanding of self by placing themselves in a meaningful totality" (Furseth and Repstad 2006).

¹⁰ The spiritual milieu as a source of cultural tools for creating meanings/meaningfulness easily comes into conflict with other sources of tools such as science. It is also an *emic* understanding that alternative-spiritual teachings are related to knowledge and wisdom (Study V).

Another core category for social sciences and the humanities, culture, could be seen as webs of meanings. As Clifford Geertz (1973: 31) argues: “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.”

Compared to abstract “meaningfulness”, sense-making is a more useful theoretical concept to understand meaningfulness on an everyday level. Sense-making is not necessarily related to facts and knowledge but also emotions, doubts, etc.: “sense making is a constant process of acquisition, reflection, and action. It is an action oriented cycle that people continually and fairly automatically go through in order to integrate experiences into their understanding of the world around them” (Kolko 2010). As I concluded already in my MA thesis, the teachings of new spirituality are an efficient toolkit to make sense of the self and the world (Uibu 2011).

However, meanings and sense-making might be too intellectualist and reductionist concepts to describe religious phenomena. Paul Heelas (2013: 195) concludes – based on the Estonian example – that the broader perspective would benefit from Charles Taylor’s notion of the “**sources of significance**”:

Estonia calls for the transformation of the study of religion /---/ transformation to pursue Charles Taylor’s programme of the comparative study of sources of significance: their various promises, expectations, credibility, authority, capacities; their failures; how they might serve the worthwhile life. Whether the sources of religion, spirituality or the secular, whether their decline or growth, it does not make much sense to investigate any one source without considering others. The academic study of ‘religion’, especially in countries like Estonia, should be transformed into the comparative study of how sources can serve the most worthwhile in life. (Heelas 2013: 195)

“Sources of significance” as a concept widens the perspective, away from the narrow view of pure meanings and meaningfulness as the core of religious systems – which could be seen as ethnocentric. The spiritual milieu as a source of cultural tools includes (transcendent) meanings, perceived significance, sacredness but also practices and techniques that provide rituals or significance in life. However, religion as „guiding authority in the lives of individuals and in societies” has lost much of its significance in present-day secular societies (T.H.R. 2006: 5). The orientation towards transcendental meanings has not disappeared and it is to be found in the non-religious and secular sphere in different forms of **existential cultures** or worldviews (Lee 2015).

Spirituality is in several ways much more than just meaning creation. By providing the tools for **the sense and experiences of sacredness and/or transcendence**, it clearly distinguishes the religious-spiritual from other cultural systems. As Anttonen (2000: 280-81) has stated, “people participate in sacred-making activities and processes of signification according to paradigms given by the belief systems to which they are committed, whether they be religious,

national or ideological”. Although religions don’t have a monopoly over sacredness and sacred experiences, they are still commonly among the primary sources. The spiritual milieu itself offers plenty of options for mystico-pneumatic experiences (Possamai 2000) and perceived transcendence (Knoblauch 2008). For example, special bodily sensations as peak experiences for spiritual practitioners have become the core experience of spirituality (Study VIII).

My studies have not analyzed spirituality deriving from the conventional categories of religion but at the sites and moments where religious “tools” are applied. People find different tools for sense-making or guidance that are effective – it is important to keep the perspective open and to explore various analytical approaches.

2. METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS AND METHODOLOGICAL PROCESS OF THE STUDIES

My studies do not focus only on a group of dedicated spiritual practitioners but cover a broader range of people who are somehow involved or interested in the spiritual milieu. It constitutes a great methodological challenge to find tools to study people whose positions towards religion and spirituality cannot be characterized by stable identity labels or even belief statements. To avoid reducing the analysis of contemporary religion to traditional and easily available attributes like religious organizations, texts, rituals or symbols, one has to answer first the question: How to grasp the fluid and disguised phenomenon and transform it into analytically approachable units?

Because of the lack of a clearly formulated sense of belonging, spiritual (and spiritually inclined) people are difficult to fit into quantitative questionnaires, especially in the context of the prevailing religious illiteracy and non-religiosity (Study I). Easily quantifiable and univocal indicators of religion in secular or post-secular societies are almost impossible to find. Due to the fluid and situational nature of religion in Estonia, surveys focusing on conventional characteristics of (institutional) religion – see section 1.5 – fail to account for the richness of religious phenomena (see also Remmel 2016). Not surprisingly, it is argued that the phenomenon of “fuzzy” spirituality and syncretic-individual religions has not gained full attention because of the lack of adequate methodology (Woodhead 2010, Heelas 2013). Paul Heelas (2013) has even used the Estonian example as proof for the need to broaden the tools used to study religion.

Methodological concerns related to quantitative studies – based on the Estonian example – are addressed in Study I which points out several problematic aspects. The analysis of Estonian surveys shows, for instance, that “conventional quantitative studies often fail to indicate the real range and importance of religious ideas and practices in societies like Estonia” where respondents do not share a universal terminology and a sense of belonging (Study I).

In terms of latent beliefs, the survey itself could stimulate respondents to take positions and express opinions that might be insignificant and meaningless to them in actual lived situations. Even qualitative interviews can create a situation where the actual relevance of questions under discussion is not clear (Day 2009). The challenge is to understand the significance of certain beliefs and practices in people’s lives. Interviews and especially surveys tend to fail here, for instance, due to the fact that “people are prepared to express opinions about almost anything, whether or not they have any knowledge of or interest in the topic” which does not equate with “finding those issues particularly important” (Voas 2009: 161). As af Burén’s (2015) research demonstrated, her questions prompted the respondents to talk about their religious connections in certain ways. Religious elements that were not appearing in open interviews were pre-

sent in the multiple-choice questions just because the wording gave these options.

The 8 studies that constitute this thesis use various methods. With an aim to detect/explore the non-standard forms of religiosity in Estonia, the studies commonly have an exploratory design and use mixed methods. For instance, Study II uses mixed methods to discuss some challenges related to the perceived social positions of spirituality and “fuzzy” forms of religiosity in Estonia. For this, I selected the available data from representative surveys, general interviews and participant observation in the spiritual milieu and then, after finding some case studies, I searched for extra information and conducted more focused interviews.

Several of the publications are structured as thematic case studies (Studies II, III, VI, and VII). I describe the methodology and research procedure for each study in the published articles. In the next section, I provide a general overview of the research process for the whole thesis and address only the most relevant methodological and ethical issues.

2.1 Research process and methodology

I started with secondary analysis and desk study in October 2010 which was followed by direct participatory fieldwork in the spiritual milieu and qualitative interviews with the participants in Estonian spiritual events in April 2011. First 12 interviews and 5 participant observations were conducted for the MA thesis in sociology and social anthropology that I defended at Central European University in 2011 (see Uibu 2011). Since then, I have been continuously involved in the field with varying intensity, conducting fieldwork in the “back-and-forth” manner that is commonly used by scholars working with subjects close to their residence (Brkovic and Hodges 2015).

Caputo (2000: 26) summarizes home-ethnography as a process of “continually coming and going to and from the field, to the point where, at times, the field became indistinguishable from home.” In this sense, my fieldwork was still to a great extent easily differentiated as spiritual events took place in special locations. Also, thematically, the events in which I participated and the people I talked to were often “exotic”. But still, research became soon intertwined with the other spheres of my life, especially when I started to include more material from social media. There were countless moments when I instantly switched to my fieldwork: it could happen during visits to my grandma or conversations at a school reunion or on a public bus.

Events in the spiritual milieu take place mostly like seminars or trainings that do not imply longer and intensive commitment. I visited regularly summer camps, fairs, seminars to stay informed about new topics and offers. As a common tendency, spiritually involved people maintain their connection with spirituality through different types of media: books, the Internet, and journals. I have been part of spiritual and esoteric groups on Facebook and mailing lists since

the beginning of my research in 2011. Therefore, my low-intensity participation was very similar to the form of participation common in the spiritual milieu.

My studies have focused on different aspects related to new spirituality. As online material proved to be very rich and relevant, I opted for a systematic methodological approach and conducted virtual ethnography/netnography (Kozinets 2010, Hine 2000). These methods were the main approach in Study VI about the spiritual internet forum/community The Nest of Angels (I used this material in two publications: Study VI and Uibu 2014). The internet forum was also a valuable source for Study VII. The discussions about Luule Viilma's teachings and their interpretations provided rich material about matters related to health and spirituality and religiosity.

Ethnographic presence in the field, meaning participation and involvement, has been an important source for grounding the claims about and the understanding of how the milieu works. Due to several reasons (including ethical) I have not heavily relied on the ethnographic observational data in the articles that form this thesis but rather used it as a complementary source. For the majority of my studies, the main material comes from in-depth interviews (Studies II, III, V, VII, and VIII). In addition to the 39 interviews I have conducted myself (plus shorter conversations during events), I analyzed the qualitative interviews conducted by the second author of Study V – Marju Saluste (14 in-depth interviews with readers of spiritual and esoteric books in Rakvere, a town in Northeastern Estonia).

Study IV uses a web-based questionnaire that I designed and distributed in 2014. With 470 respondents, it provided me with plenty of quantitative and qualitative data, while helping me to expand my view - in addition to the previous observations and the in-depth interviews. Study IV incorporates both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the responses; this database will also be a source for some forthcoming publications.

There are several representative studies (both comparative and only locally administered) about the religious situation in Estonia that I have not personally conducted. Study I offers some interpretation of this combined data in the form of a review-article for diverse studies about Estonia. Representative data have been valuable input in other chapters as well (e.g. Study II).

Altogether, these methodological tools have offered multiple opportunities for the validation of my research by triangulation. In addition to different data sources and methods, I have studied different actors in the field including the most direct opponents of spirituality – skeptics. I have adopted different perspectives on the phenomena by directly participating in the events and analyzing secondary (including quantitative) data. To bring the data and sources together I presented different meaningful case studies – clustered around specific research questions.

2.2 Research ethics and my position as a researcher

The starting point of this research was one of the puzzles arising from my MA thesis: “Why do people believe so willingly something that conflicts with basic knowledge taught in schools, knowledge which should be deeply rooted in the prevalent (for Estonia, atheistic) understanding of the working principles of the world?” (Uibu 2011: 3). Having no intention to debunk spiritual ideas, I have tried to explain the continuous presence and efficacy of spirituality, while aiming to introduce a more balanced view in the otherwise very polarized discussions about the nature of spiritual phenomena. With the task “to provide a different voice” of social scientific analysis in mind, I have published academic articles in Estonian and I have written several articles and given interviews for the Estonian mass-media.

Spirituality is a controversial topic that triggers very different reactions and provokes heated debates. Even in the academic context, spiritual phenomena are researched in highly diverse manners. On the one hand, there are authors taking a very critical approach to spirituality (e.g. Carrette and King 2005), on the other, spirituality can be presented as a great opportunity for humankind (Tacey 2004). In this thesis, I aim to maintain an observer’s position which would allow me to explain the phenomenon but not to “explain it away”. Without trying to explain the ontological-functional claims of spiritual teachings, my analysis is focusing mostly on the meanings and the social position of spirituality. Empirically, I have sought to find a balance between *emic* and *etic* voices in my articles. Therefore, I have combined methods and data sources to keep enough distance but still be able to provide an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon. Of course, there is also the risk of becoming involved, being immersed into the *emic* perspective. During the last stretch of the thesis-writing process, I have not participated much in spiritual events and I have made it a point to increase the distance.

During my research I was faced with several ethical dilemmas. As a most general principle the researcher should avoid doing any “harm” to the people he studies (Hammersley and Traianou 2012). Given the sensitive and personal nature of my research topic, there is a high risk to encroach on my informants’ personal beliefs (by deconstructing their supernatural stories, for example).

Furthermore, my scholarly publications do not stay within the academic spheres as used to be common for social scientists (Hammersley and Traianou 2012: 128). Not surprisingly, several people involved in spirituality as well as skeptics were readers of my scholarly work. I have discovered my academic publications being discussed on the website that I wrote about, and on one occasion the interviewee referred to my previously published articles during our conversation. It is a delicate position, which poses dilemmas about maintaining the balance and positioning yourself as a researcher.

In-depth ethnographic cases pertaining to a specific field from a small country make it very difficult to offer complete anonymity. For instance, still at the beginning of my research, I presented at one Estonian conference where one

listener recognized the personal story of my informant although I had changed the name and altered the details. After this incident, I have been careful to cut the stories into smaller pieces and think about the way data is presented. Another question is the use of online material where specific ethical concerns are related, including the right to use the texts and usernames that I will describe more in the methodology part of Study VI.

3. SITUATIONAL AND INCLINATION-BASED RELIGIOSITIES

In the studies, I have analyzed religion in vernacular contexts with an aim to offering a more general model and finding better suited terms to characterize contemporary religious belonging. The study of spiritualities and the spiritual milieu helps to understand the transformation of individual ways of being religiously involved and to detect the social dimensions of these involvements (Wuthnow 2001: 309). My focus on lived religion has led me to describe the situationality and practicality of religion, observing religiosity in the “ordinary concerns of life, at the junctures of self and culture” (Orsi 2003: 172). The following chapter discusses religious participation – based on the example of the Estonian spiritual milieu – and addresses the question of how to approach religious connections and influences by offering an inclination-based model.

3.1 Situational and functional participation in the spiritual milieu

In the spiritual milieu, the lack of constant obligation-based involvement is more explicit compared to institutional religions such as Christianity. Studies about contemporary religiosity, New Age spirituality, for instance, conclude that episodic participation is the core characteristic of these phenomena (Possamai 2000). Situational need-based participation means that spirituality could be seen as a “low intensity religion” (see Turner 2008). Weak or missing institutional control leads to religious ‘nomadism’ (Hervieu-Léger 2001): the situational nature of religious involvement means that religious and spiritual tools become actualized only in certain moments. In the context of contemporary syncretism and plurality of religious approaches, even several dedicated practitioners admit to their episodic contact with spirituality (see the readers of spiritual books in Study V, for example). Participation means mobility and the lack of obligations and/or stable belonging. Possamai (2000: 372) has described his informants who “move to one group and leave it after a while. Afterwards, they might visit one or many other groups or simply stop ‘seeking’ for a while”. This type of involvement is common among my interviewees as well.

Subjective-life-spirituality, especially in the context of religious pluralism, requires much less commitment compared to the more traditional “religion-as-life” (Heelas et al 2005). However, situationality and practical concerns are natural to any religious involvement despite scholars’ focus on institutions and characteristics, which tends to depict religion as a more stable and coherent phenomenon (see 1.4). In the case of participation in the spiritual milieu, the situationality is just more explicit: going to a seminar or a consultation does not imply longer-term commitments and the meaning of participation in these events is more diverse and informal than with institutional religions. McGuire (2008) argues that as a consequence of the Christian and especially Lutheran

Churches' dominant focus on the transcendent, the relevance of Christianity for people's daily mundane concerns has diminished. However, people expect both non-Christian spiritualities and the Church to offer practical help with different life problems, which has been pointed out also in Estonian studies (Ringvee 2012: 282).

The spiritual milieu offers flexible and diverse techniques for everyday practical matters as people tend to seek "spiritual answers to mundane problems" (O'Neil 2001: 456). The boom of the "religious/spiritual market" (Roof 2001, Bowman 1999) and "client cults" (Stark and Bainbrige 1985) indicates a high demand for this type of solutions and modes of participation. Involvement in the spiritual milieu is commonly **goal-orientated** and motivated by the need to find **solutions for specific problems**. The impetus may come from a crisis (such as health-problems, loss of job) or be just perceived as a need to find (new) meanings, aims in life (see Studies V and VII)¹¹. Spiritual teachings can be seen as instruments in an individualistic quest for "perfection of the self" (Hervieu-Léger 2001: 164), similarly to exercising at the gym (Uibu 2011). The turn to spiritual and "alternative" solutions could be motivated by more general disappointment in dominant sources and perception of an urgently needed change in the society (due to environmental issues or wars, for example). Spirituality offers a positive program that starts with a philosophy of implementing change on a personal level.

This thesis offers several case studies that illustrate people's practical pursuits. Health-related seeking (Study VII) is often directed to finding solutions for physical and mental discomforts. New interpretations and better comprehension of the world are sought from books (Study V). Study VI observes the functioning of the spiritual internet forum The Nest of Angels and concludes that both the forum and the angels have strong therapeutic properties. Firstly, emotional support is provided, either by fellow users directly or, indirectly, by confirmations that angels will help in case of troubles and difficulties. Secondly, the forum allows people to acquire knowledge both on spiritual and practical issues; users can find validation for their otherwise deviant experiences. The

¹¹ The search for new meanings and perspectives in life could be motivated by certain specific crises but could also be driven by some lack of fulfilment, especially in the case of people who have sufficient financial resources or time to start thinking about the meaning of life (e.g. after their children leave home). The perceived need for meaningfulness from "alternative" sources is described, for instance, in Study V about book-readers who use spiritual-esoteric books as guides. While teachings are different in their approaches and emphases, spirituality generally assures that the universe can be comprehended (often only non-intellectually through meditation, for example). Hammer explains this endeavour by developing Charles Taylor's notion of *ontic logos*: „a view of the cosmos as a meaningful order, in which a natural one-to-one correspondence exists between the actual structure of the world, the knowledge we can have of it and the moral law we are to follow" (2004: 496). The desire for explanations is also a strong motivation for the dedicated followers of Luule Viilma's teachings, in which they find a sense of order and rightness that is increasingly hard to find in the postmodern world (Study VII).

Nest encourages the members to interpret situations and objects as meaningful (angelic) signs, which might change people's perceptions of the world by adding a layer of positive emotions. There are frequently stories told by users who arrived to the Nest being "broken" or "desperate" and then obtained validation with the help of spiritual ideas and angels as supernatural beings. Therefore, this forum illustrates well the "therapeutic nature of New Age religion" (Tucker 2002: 46). The transformation of angel representations constitutes a salient example of explicit emphasis on human-centeredness and this-worldliness characteristic of modern religiosity. Rather than the frightening messengers of God, angels are the embodiment of broader spiritual values, while providing specific techniques and help so that they can be likened to tools in women's handbags (Utriainen 2014).

In spite of its postmodern nature, New Age spirituality often means striving for individual enchantment and salvation in this world, which is rather modernistic and teleological. Spirituality as negotiation of self-identity can be seen as a project (see Foucault's "technologies of the self") and a method that humans employ to understand themselves (Sawicki 1994). Similarly, Hazleden (2003) points to the mechanisms whereby spiritual self-help literature creates a self-reflexive citizen perfectly fit for liberal democracies: "the effective, well-adjusted, autonomous individual in charge of their own emotional life who links their personal goals and desires to social order and stability, and links power to subjectivity" (Hazleden 2003: 424–25).

Obviously, there are many other functions that the spiritual milieu could fulfil. Numerous participants, especially those who do not have a strong need to become more involved, have a tourist approach to spiritual events – they are "(thrill) seekers" who want just to take "'time out' from the daily grind" (MacKian 2012: 70). The spiritual milieu with its variety of techniques offers opportunities for so-called peak experiences. It has been argued that another core category of the religious sphere, the "sacred", has lost its relevance in favour of the more abstract and individually approachable "transcendence" (Knoblauch 2008). The spiritual milieu gives people the chance to access transcendence for their own (often practical) purposes. In this sense, following Malinowski's distinction between religion and magic, spirituality is rather similar to magic which – as a resource – is practiced to obtain something else while religious practice is a goal in itself (Malinowski and Redfield 1948).

3.2 Different intensities of being related to the spiritual milieu

Situational participation and the use of spiritual techniques in certain moments is still something more than just instrumental consumption of a "product". New Age has a "strongly transpersonal character together with an additional mystico-transcendent or sacred content", requiring belief in a "form of connection with an all-pervading 'Force' or 'Energy'" (Rose 1998: 13). Situational contact and participation – even for utilitarian/practical concerns – require some willingness

to use this type of teachings, while participation tends to bring about some further changes in values, lifestyle, or understandings of the world.

Here, it is beneficial to apply Swidler's (1986) description of cultural toolboxes containing representations, knowledge, value-positions. For example, spiritual explanations for illnesses or other obstacles can be seen as a cultural tool, similarly to specific techniques and methods that the spiritual milieu offers. There are also broader values, grounding principles (like self-development, human-centeredness – see Heelas 1997, Altnurme 2013) in the milieu that tend to be strengthened by participation. "Conversion" to spirituality usually means the appropriation of certain tools that the spiritual milieu offers (including standard narratives of making sense of a person's own experiences and life events) and becoming connected to information channels. In addition, participation means the appropriation of some broader values and principles (such as the perceived necessity for self-development) – see chapter 4.



Figure 1. Critical steps in getting involved.

The (positive) experiences of using something from the milieu tend to support further willingness to continue. Therefore, and without applying direct identity labels, Figure 1 identifies some significant steps in the process of becoming involved.

The first and essential step is the (abstract) belief in the efficacy of spiritual techniques and/or in the broader principles of spiritual self-development. For people who have not turned their attention to spiritual-supernatural issues these beliefs are probably latent. This is visible among survey respondents (55% of Estonians) who agree that extrasensory healers can heal efficiently but have never had contact with a healer (Altnurme 2013). However, people having this abstract belief are not skeptical either and do not have predominantly negative

attitudes towards the spiritual milieu so that their scientific-materialistic or strongly religious worldviews do not prevent them from considering to try out spiritual teachings or techniques.

Beliefs in spiritual and supernatural phenomena could be supported by the narratives of other people's experiences that create the sense of normality (and even ubiquity) of the teachings. Some scholars have talked about a general environment of occulturation where spiritual, esoteric, occult meanings are culturally increasingly available (Partridge 2004). Even though "occulturation" seems too strong to describe the general cultural climate in Estonia, it points out the tendency for spiritual-occult elements to be increasingly present in popular mainstream (see Study V about spiritual media, for example).

The second step in Figure 1 means stronger involvement through existing personal experiences with spiritual techniques or teachings. These experiences might be mystico-pneumatic (Possamai 2000): some special bodily sensations, perceived transcendence, or a wide range of subjective forms of "peak experiences". However, the first step could be also a rather random contact with spiritual techniques/teachings, which manages to leave a trace in the person's understandings about spirituality and to enhance their willingness to further participate in the spiritual milieu.

The third level of involvement intensity describes people who have first-hand experiences of getting help and/or finding new interpretations for life or life events. They are commonly also active distributors of narratives about the usefulness of the spiritual milieu (see section 4.3). Finally, the fourth level, there are people whose lifestyles and social interactions are significantly related to the spiritual milieu so that spirituality plays a key role in their lives and it might even become their profession. Although the concept of spiritual lifestyle is vague, it indicates a strong presence of spirituality in the fabric of people's mundane/everyday lives.

Obviously, there are many problems with this type of classification. People may easily jump steps, for example. As shown in previous studies, even skeptically-minded people, without prior belief in the efficacy of the techniques, can experience some special bodily sensations that make the sacred or the transcendent real for them (Ostenfeld-Rosenthal 2011). If their need is very strong, people could simply try out different solutions, without any previously positive attitude or existing beliefs being required. The supportive effect of the stories of other people's experiences might be very strong, especially if the source for these experiences is a close person (Hammer 2010).

The schematic pyramid in Figure 1 illustrates the general logic of the next step usually building on the previous one. It also gives the sense that the bottom layers of the pyramid – e.g. abstract belief in the efficacy of the techniques and some contact – are much broader than the upper levels. The proportions are not symmetrical on the diagram, as in the Estonian case the first layer includes most probably the majority of the population and the very top one – only few individuals who are involved as occupational insiders (see next section – 3.3).

Some authors have described different types and intensities of involvement and grouped/characterized participants based on that. For instance, Heelas (2007) distinguished between “fully engaged”, “serious part-timers”, and “casual part-timers”. MacKian (2012) modified the groups, offering a similar schema with “consultative practitioners”, “serious practitioners”, “everyday spiritual practitioners” and “general occulturation/non-practitioner consumers”. The studies that make up this thesis indicate the difficulties of categorizing participants using static labels which tend to construct forms of involvement as being more fixed than they actually are.



Figure 2. Different intensities of involvement.

I use Figure 2, which is a modification of Figure 1, to discuss intensities of involvement as concentric circles rather than steps. MacKian (2012: 73) has drawn a similar “onion diagram”. However, I am not using the labels to characterize the participants as groups (as the participation is sporadic anyway) but rather I use the diagram to indicate *potential willingness to use a spiritual “toolkit” and, therefore, to characterize mental dispositions towards using spiritual solutions.*

Figure 2 has 5 different layers: occupational core, regular participation, strong inclination, weak inclination, and some knowledge and beliefs. These layers do not stand for groups with shared characteristics; not even the most stable and easily definable circle – the core. I propose rather to think about the circles in terms of spiritual tools and values being more or less within people’s reach. Clearly, regular participants in seminars and lectures are more involved and knowledgeable of spiritual solutions so that positions closer to the core indicate stronger inclinations to use spiritual solutions. In addition, people who have a stronger connection to the spiritual milieu possess more (and better) tools to overcome skepticism and distrust in the spiritual-alternative sphere, e.g. narratives of personal experiences (see part 4). From the perspective of studying contemporary spirituality, it is beneficial to ask how much these different activities, tools are within the reach of different people.

Virtual proximity is not a stable characteristic and not the most convenient tool for scholars – however, the necessity to broaden the view clearly arises from the empirical material. The Estonian example indicates the importance of the weaker links that require sensitive tools to depict and to account for those people who are not constantly and actively involved. Therefore, a model that reflects how close or how far spiritual tools are for people mentally/attitudinally helps to think in terms of **inclinations to believe and to turn to spiritual or religious solutions** rather than supposedly constant believing or belonging. The strength of the person’s inclination to spirituality could be determined by asking: How likely is a person with a certain need to turn to the spiritual milieu and to find a solution there, and what are the issues for which that person is likely to seek help in new spirituality?¹²

Visual depictions such as Figure 2 are effective in bringing out some limitations of the conceptualization and in raising some further questions. For example, the diagram implies a clearer separation of the spiritual from the secular and the scientific-materialistic than the empirical material suggests. Some teachings like mindfulness or Yoga are widely accepted in both mainstream and spiritual spheres.¹³ With the mainstreaming and increasing visibility of different spiritual sources in people’s lives, spirituality merges with mainstream and people increasingly do not perceive the skeptical-materialistic discourse as opposing their spiritual worldviews and lifestyles.¹⁴ Although my empirical material collected mostly in 2011 and 2012 still supports the presence of the skeptical “other” perceived by spiritual people (see Studies II and III) – the process of mainstreaming means that the onion diagram is increasingly losing its relevance. When the spiritual milieu dissolves into the mainstream, the scholars of religion and spirituality have to focus more on the comparative study of general cultures (and cultural origins of certain spiritual techniques). However, despite some signs of mainstreaming of spirituality, in Estonia, spiritual teachings belong to a niche at the moment; the majority of the distribution channels are specific and perceived as “alternative”.

Another question arises from the very syncretic nature of new spirituality itself. The people who are inclined to spirituality are accepting other sources of

¹² As the “inclinations” diagram has emerged from a meta-analysis of my research, the studies that make up this thesis focus more on the questions: Why would a person use spiritual techniques, or how is the process of appropriation taking place?

¹³ As common rhetoric in the spiritual milieu, scientific studies might indeed confirm the efficacy of some techniques. For example, one alternative spiritual portal referred excitedly to a scientific journal “Cancer” that published a paper about Mindfulness-based therapy that has experientially proven to help to maintain telomere length (Carlson et al 2015).

¹⁴ It is also debatable what should be seen to be outside the Figure 2: indifference or skeptical hostility. The positions are flexible: for example, some of those who answer that they believe in some sort of extrasensory powers or spiritual self-development might be either outsiders or weakly involved/inclined. Skepticism means taking an active position but in the Estonian case the majority is just indifferent (Remmel 2016) in the sense of not turning their attention to and not thinking about it.

tools and knowledge, which could be secular or religious. Thus seemingly mutually exclusive religious positions are mingled: people inclined to spirituality are often inclined to Christianity as well. For instance, they could believe simultaneously in the karma-cycle and Paradise (see Pekko and Koppel 2013). Furthermore, due to its flexible and highly syncretic nature, the spiritual milieu has incorporated elements of science, Christianity, and especially Eastern religions so that all these traditions are somehow (although commonly in altered forms) represented in the core. Therefore, it is impossible to select the approaches and specialists that should be included in the core. Teachings circulating in the milieu are very different. For example, Estonian geopaths operate more or less as a science club (Kivari 2016) but remain strongly related to the spiritual milieu. Some health-related techniques and products like food supplements mimic the pharmaceutical system of medicine but are distributed through channels of the spiritual milieu. To conclude, although the scope and the boundaries of the core cannot be clearly defined, there are still some critical factors and principles that I will discuss in the next sub-chapter.

3.3 The core of the spiritual milieu – occupational practitioners.

Spiritual ideas and techniques as tools require a supportive context and know-how in order for people to be able to use them. The idea of individual seeking and religiosity “*à la carte*” (Van Hove 1999) implies the existence of a supply side: the providers of teachings. Taking the *à la carte* metaphor further: there has to be a restaurant infrastructure, including kitchen and cooks, that provides a menu where to choose from. As Hervieu-Léger (2006: 61) explains: “Individuals freely assemble their personal “belief solution,” but they do so using symbol resources whose availability remains confined within certain limits. The first of these are related to the cultural environment; the second to the access that each person has to these resources.”

The prerequisite for “demand-based” participation is the presence of a spiritual-religious sphere that people can access in case of need. The availability and proximity of spiritual (alternative) solutions is an important indicator of the position of spirituality. The core circle in Figure 2 involves professionals, occupational practitioners, whose income depends on the functioning of the spiritual milieu and who are therefore actively engaged in the promotion and development of spiritual solutions. The “core” incorporates different practitioners: specialists working as consultants and therapists as well as practitioners who are deeply immersed in the alternative-esoteric milieu.

Pluralism and competition have been described as “creating demand” and catering to specific needs, therefore helping religions to increase their popularity and utility for people (Stark 1997). Competition enhances flexibility and creativity to meet people’s needs. The core group is critical as provider of **innovation and a constant supply of new techniques and teachings in the spiritual milieu**. Approaches to contemporary religiosity that focus on supply

emphasize “how religious economies function to generate or stifle religious demand” (Stark and Iannaccone 1994: 250). The parallel to marketing – although it may generate misleading connotations and cannot be used as a model for participation – is useful here. The central idea of the market is to react to every thinkable need and to create new ones (Kotler and Keller 2012). The core of the spiritual milieu as a constant, creative source of supply is one engine that keeps the milieu going. In addition, the actively involved people often act as spokespeople for the spiritual milieu and therefore influence broader social meanings and attitudes (see Study II).

The very centre of the creative core has a specific status. Spiritual and esoteric authors who have gained “guru” status are commonly not required to be cohesive and fully logical. Utter nonsense is easily tolerated as the teachers are seen to follow a logic different from the regular one. For example, knowledge production through the process of channelling – getting information from the universe or higher consciousness – is believed to bring only some brilliant glimpses of new truths but not coherent and fully logical guidance. Like an old time radio broadcast (AM radio) with different stations mingling and disturbance by cosmic noises, it is up to the listener to select meaningful content and ignore random sounds. Study VII illustrates this tendency based on the reception of Luule Viilma – many readers consider her best-selling book series “Teachings for Survival” suitable for browsing and picking up just some meaningful elements.¹⁵

Spirituality in Estonia is strongly influenced by foreign teachings but remains mostly country- or language-based. The core of the spiritual milieu is small in Estonia as the demand for “spiritual services” is not high enough to provide income to many. Also, people tend to avoid leaving their “conventional” jobs and the mainstream altogether: teaching spiritual techniques could bring some extra income or even be a hobby, seen as an opportunity to help yourself first of all.¹⁶ Sometimes and in more regulated fields such as medicine, the attempt to combine the roles might prove complicated. Study VII examines how medical doctor Luule Viilma – as a seminal figure in the Estonian spiritual milieu – offered spiritual solutions for perceived shortcomings of the medical system and society. A heretic in the eyes of the medical system, dr Viilma felt very clearly the pressure and stigmas related to belonging to the “alternative” sphere, ultimately having her doctor’s license withdrawn (Study VII).

¹⁵ This applies to religious texts and Bible-reading as well: for example, particular literary practices and hermeneutic procedures cultivated by religious groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses (Kirsch 2007:517). There is no burden of coherence, nobody expects the book to read as a guide from beginning to end. Generally still, the spiritual mind-body-spirit books are written in guidance-style and belong to self-help literature being therefore easy to read (see Study V).

¹⁶ While formal requirements are basically absent for advancing as a specialist, the hierarchies in the spiritual milieu are flat. Even with practices that have some standards for experts like Reiki, the certified healers in some traditions require only little training. However, there are several figures whose charismatic presence has gained them a stable group of followers and clientele (e.g. Mai-Agate Väljataga, Igor Mang).

Numerous people are actively participating in the meaning-creation process without working as consultants but expressing (and constructing) their expertise in the online medium and/or social networks. In Study VI, the Nest of Angels is a great example of a virtual space where vernacular and collective meaning creation takes place. Obviously, there are cultural and power relations at work but it remains very different from conventional religions or institutionalized forms of knowledge production. As one of its central conclusions, this thesis claims that the forms of meaning creation and dissemination have become network-based, which leads to changes in fundamental (power) relations (see 3.5).

3.4 The strength of inclinations

Inclination to spirituality is more complex than, for example, someone's inclination to support the liberal party or the preference to go on vacation in Spain. Participation in the spiritual milieu brings about some more fundamental changes in ontological and epistemological understandings about the world (see Studies II, VI, VIII).¹⁷ However, people can be inclined to spirituality in varying degrees. Participants with a **strong inclination** have already had spiritual experiences and have internalized the explanations offered by spirituality: they could, for example, see themselves as predestined to use spiritual solutions. Their sense-making process, e.g. how they interpret and experience their everyday experiences (Dervin 1999), is influenced by spiritual meanings. For example, they might try to detect the energy of the food with their hands while shopping at the grocery store (see Study VIII). It also means that spiritual interpretations are readily used to explain even quite random events. As I show in Study IV, strongly inclined Angel-practitioners naturally interpreted the falling of a feather as a sign from angels, a sign from a benevolent supernatural order.

The strength of the inclinations is determined mainly by how close and commonly used those meanings and interpretations are. Based on the observations of the role of spirituality in people's everyday lives MacKian concludes that, with many informants, their "relationship to the world takes on additional enchanted dimensions, and every aspect of their everyday life becomes more than being placed alongside other objects and people" (2012: 81). For MacKian's informant Mark, spirituality is a constant 'hum of the engine' that is sending him everywhere. This indicates a very strong inclination.

However, despite the constant presence of "the hum", my studies suggest that before long people actually stop noticing it as it becomes just background noise. Similarly to Possamai (2000), I have met several "spiritual people" who admitted to not having any regular practices – with no visible influence in their

¹⁷ There are some fruitful parallels, for example to nationalism and ethnic-cultural belonging. Ethnic belonging seems to be something "given", however, several scholars have argued for situational ethnicity/nationality or Aihwa Ong's "flexible citizenship" (1999). Worldview and not deeply socialized spiritual and religious connections are more fluid than the common understandings would suggest.

daily lives. Although it is very likely that these persons will turn to the spiritual milieu when a new impulse or specific need appears, they do not turn their attention to it constantly if it is not part of their everyday trajectories and practices (and commonly, even with committed practitioners, it isn't). This could be compared to living near the waterfall – the river could be very efficiently used if necessary, otherwise the sound is something that becomes just background and remains unnoticeable. This understanding of spirituality is also seen in the linguistic analysis of Study IV where respondents described spirituality rather in terms of resource.¹⁸

The models of religious belonging that assume more stable belonging are failing to include less involved people who, according to my estimation, have become the main supporters of the social and cultural significance of new spirituality. The outer spheres in Figure 2 are proportionally very densely populated. People with a **weak inclination** could be simply readers of some books or internet news portals, or members of social media thematic groups, e.g. Facebook groups. Weakly inclined people could belong to the category of “nones” and are especially relevant in the Estonian context because they, most probably, make up the majority of the population (see the overview in Study I). In addition to the common discourse of seeking, there are several other indications of inclination-type of connections. In the survey data, “inclinations rather than believing and belonging” are visible not only in the confusion over the identity labels but also in the common occurrence of “ratherism” – which means that respondents tend to avoid committed answers and prefer to choose “rather believe/not believe” options (Heelas 2013, more addressed in Study I).¹⁹ The latent possibility of turning to the spiritual milieu is similarly visible, for example, in the surprisingly high level of belief in spiritual self-development or the efficacy of spiritual solutions (such as healers with extrasensory power) – see the analyses in Studies I and II.

The boundaries between spiritual milieu and mainstream culture are blurred. For some scholars of religion this could seem to weaken spirituality as “many elements of the New Age are vulnerable to being co-opted by the cultural mainstream and trivialized by the mass media” transforming it into “cheap, lightweight product” (Bruce 2000: 234). I argue, on the contrary, that a high degree of adaptability of spiritual values and understandings to popular culture is one of the key factors for the cultural significance of the spiritual milieu.

¹⁸ However, participation in the spiritual milieu has some more abstract and hidden cultural influences as the spiritual milieu provides spiritual and mystical meanings that could endorse beliefs in phenomena that do not belong to the materialistic, secular worldview. It provides people with cultural tools such as meaning-making, epistemological-ontological understandings.

¹⁹ The majority of Estonians have a “ratherish” attitude: they avoid expressing strong opinions while they do not fully reject supernatural forces, agents and world-order – the proportion of people choosing the option “rather agree” or “rather disagree” in the questionnaires is high (see also Heelas 2013).

Inclination-based weak commitment is not considered a truly valid form of religious participation by some. Similarly, there is a tendency to underestimate the social resonance/importance of the phenomenon because of its inability to create a cohesive group with values, practices, norms, social relations, etc.

We should appreciate the very limited investment that most people make in the New Age. It oversimplifies, of course, but we can think of influence as a choice between range and depth: the least demanding activities are the most popular. For the vast majority of people interested in the New Age milieu, participation is shallow. They read a book or two and attend a few meetings. They do not become committed adherents to particular cults; they do not regularly engage in time-consuming rituals or therapies; they do not radically alter their lives. (Bruce 2000: 233)

Individualistic participation in the spiritual milieu diminishes the latter's influence and social significance as "the individualism of the New Age acts as a major constraint on its influence". (Bruce 2000). The milieu of new spirituality has indeed a very different kind of influence which seems elusive and vague from the point of view of conventional sociology of religion. On the other hand, the cultural appropriation of these ideas and the spiritual milieu's mingling with mainstream culture intensifies its cultural significance. Of course, there is a danger that it might become too diluted to be considered a distinctive phenomenon anymore. However, this seems to concern more the scholarly research tradition than the impact of the phenomenon itself.

Dominantly weak commitments should receive their place in the field of religious studies, broadening its perspective, as there is no reason to limit participation to its stable forms. A broader approach is necessary not only because of the large proportion of weakly inclined people but because of the fluid and layered modes of participation itself. As Study VII about Viilma's teachings concludes, religious meanings are easily adjustable – people have freedom to interpret the teachings/principles as related to religiosity or not (depending on their attitudes towards religions). A similar tendency arose from other studies as well (Studies VIII and V).

3.5 What keeps the inclinations alive?

Situational belonging and New Age spiritualities do not fit well into the dichotomy of religious organizations – church, sect, cult; "spiritual people" participate in fluid networks instead of settled collectivities (Possamai 2005). As Campbell has pointed out, it is believed that spirituality as a cultic milieu is supposed to be unstable and in case it does not evolve into a sect-type organization it would "fade away in the face of societal opposition or the absence of a charismatic leader" (2002 [1978]: 13). From this point of view, the continuous perseverance and even growth of the spiritual milieu in the absence of strong central institu-

tions is inexplicable and raises the question of what keeps spiritual inclinations alive.

First, although seemingly “alternative”, the (ideal) general principles of the spiritual milieu actually fit into the set of neoliberal Western values. As McGuire argued:

The cultic pattern of new spirituality turns pluralism, individualism, and freedom of choice, characteristic of the modern world, into religious virtues and advantages in a spiritual realm focused on an imminent sacred reality. (McGuire 2008: 194)

Despite the fact that New Age has historically been an ‘alternative’ subculture opposed to the mainstream, new spiritualities nowadays fit well into the culture of late capitalism with global markets and mass consumption (Possamai 2003). Many of the mind-body-spirit practices pertain to the notion of “self-care” that has become deeply rooted in the Western social psyche (Sawicki 1994, Ziguras 2004). Therefore we can see how broader cultural currencies (individualism, self-development) support the spiritual content and also inclination-type connections.

Second, there are networks and structures that fulfil perfectly the role of central institutions. New information technologies have undoubtedly already had a great impact on the forms of religious belonging. Therefore, they appear to be one of the key factors that enable the spiritual milieu as such to operate. In the absence of traditional belonging or participation but with the inclination-type of relatedness instead, several indirect channels keep the spiritual milieu operating by linking inclined individuals to each other and to “the core”. It is, therefore, suggested that the spiritual milieu is a kind of “network” (Van Hove 1999). Possamai (2000, 2007) has referred to some useful theoretical approaches to describe this type of belonging such as situationalistic networks or the German term *Bund* used by Schmalenbach already in the 1920s and later by Hetherington (1994).

In my thesis, I observe the media and communication channels that build the network and create the *bünde*. Especially relevant for the dissemination of spiritual ideas are books²⁰, internet portals, and thematic web-sites. Dissemination

²⁰ As an ‘inner’ and ‘hidden’ phenomenon, spirituality is very well served by books which are excellent cultural symbols: a book is seen as a source of wisdom and reading as an individual ritual of acquiring this wisdom (see Study V). Therefore, some authors – for instance, Hervieu-Léger (2001) – call spirituality a book-centred network of individual readers. The lack of clear-cut boundaries and universally accepted labels makes it difficult to give estimations of print-run and circulation, nonetheless, Study V provides an overview of the popularity of spiritual and esoteric media in Estonia. There are several indications in the form of best-selling books, the highest ranked TV or radio shows with spiritual-esoteric content, yearly horoscopes that tend to nearly double the print-run of newspapers. Despite this popularity, spirituality is seen as ‘alternative’ and considered inappropriate and even contemptible by Estonian mainstream media.

of spiritual ideas and solutions by books has already a long history (Puttick 2005), but the Internet has become an increasingly important resource for sharing information and discussions. Fitting well with new networks and virtual structures and institutions, the spiritual milieu harnesses effectively the potential of new media. Virtual networks, internet forums and media channels might be individually unstable but surprisingly solid altogether. Even if one stream dries up, there are several others ready to take its place. Dependence on volunteer-based input is not a problem if there are enough people willing to contribute.

The specific mechanisms for functioning as a virtual community are analyzed in Study VI. For weakly inclined people, the Internet offers diverse and comfortable options of being slightly in contact but not making any stronger commitments. In Estonia, spiritual and esoteric Facebook groups and internet forums are popular: there are tens of thousands of members who get constant updates in their newsfeeds. Therefore, in a world where Facebook and other virtual platforms (with a great proportion of user-generated content) take the central position in information distribution, it would be short-sighted to refer to the spiritual milieu as non-institutional. Institutions have simply changed and channels hitherto considered “private” have a wide and significant social impact (see discussion about public-private in Knoblauch 2008). The process of increasing mediatization (including social media) together with individualization are changing religion considerably: as “media democratize access to the sacred, the quest for religious fulfillment and salvation or whatever “rewards” expected from encounters with transcendent realities” is less structured by institutions (Asamoah-Gyadu 2008:59). People use their perceived natural autonomy to create their own “religious projects”.

Technological and social changes have challenged the role of dominant institutions: some authors have even pointed out “the end of Big” – decreasing dominance of big and traditional authorities, especially in some spheres like media where the Internet is making David the new Goliath (Mele 2013). Obviously, this claim has many limitations but the functioning of the spiritual milieu illustrates similar tendencies related to the religious sphere: more channels that support a vernacular dimension.

Therefore, spiritual topics have found an outlet in more specific channels such as women’s and lifestyle magazines, internet news portals (Studies II and V).

4. THE PROCESS OF BECOMING INVOLVED AND FINDING VALIDATION

Another fruitful option to understand the functional logic of the spiritual milieu is to describe the process of becoming involved in (or inclined towards) spirituality. Possamai (2000) argues that the term “conversion” is far too strong to describe the path of becoming involved. Instead, he uses Travisano’s concept of “alterations” meaning gradual changes built on existing programs of behaviour. Based on his qualitative study of Australian spiritual practitioners he writes:

My participants move to one group and leave it after a while. Afterwards, they might visit one or many other groups or simply stop ‘seeking’ for a while. ‘Alternation’ involves constant mobility: there is never a radical change but a constant ‘flip flopping’ among, or back and forth ‘visits in and out’ of, many *Bünde*. (Possamai 2000: 372)

This description summarizes very well the type of involvement most widespread in the Estonian spiritual milieu and could very well be a common pattern for different contemporary religions and spiritualities that lay outside of the “life-as-religion” type of belonging²¹. These trajectories and “flip floppings” are fruitful to study, especially in a pluralistic society lacking primary socialization into religion(s), where scientific-materialistic understandings are perceived widely as the norm (Uibu 2011).

Spiritual-alternative solutions are usually not random products to consume but require a specific supportive context and some confidence to start to explore the field in the first place (Study VIII). Because of the weak support by institutions or groups, the individual has a greater role in overcoming the doubts related to teachings. In the validation of spiritual beliefs, the believer has to reach for “subjective certainty” (Hervieu-Léger 2001: 169). Obviously, the individual relies on the available cultural tools and meanings in this process. For example, first-hand experience is a key step – but to get to the phase of experiencing requires to overstep some barriers (both mental and physical). There are certain trajectories to be followed in order to appropriate the teachings and spiritual interpretations (e.g. Study VI about angels, Study VIII about body perception).

The validation of beliefs and practices is a complicated and *multi-layered process where outside sources of validation are creating the willingness to get absorbed into the practices, to start to feel and experience something “alternative” or “spiritual”*. For example, to start to perceive angels as more than just metaphors, people need some support which could be provided by fellow members of the internet forum (see Study VI). Even if the members of the forum

²¹ Conversion to Christianity could similarly have very different intensities. However, because of institutional regulation and support, the process is still more standardized with explicit and often ritualistic-symbolic dimensions. The spiritual marketplace model is more chaotic and fluid.

have seen something seemingly angelic, they commonly seek for the others' confirmations before they interpret the experience as supernatural.

Therefore, we can distinguish different types of **influential sources in the validation process**: arguments from the teachings, stories by others, and personal experiences. The spiritual texts and teachings themselves contain elements of evidence of meaningfulness and trustworthiness: most commonly in the form of the appeal to tradition, personal experience and scientism (Hammer 2004). Representations and connotations that depend on the cultural meanings create the aura of general plausibility of the teachings. Studies II and IV exemplify how these meanings are socially constructed and challenge the scientific-materialistic position that has been the dominant source of knowledge in Western secular societies.²²

A second level of confirmation that the teachings are effective is more personal and related to people's own experiences (or the experiences of others, usually close people). This type of evidence goes much deeper than 'rational' arguments about why somebody should or should not believe in spiritual teachings. The aspects of embodied experience are discussed in Study VIII. Study II describes some conflicts between "outside" sources and the power of individual validation.

There is a tendency for those using concepts such as "cultural toolkit" or "personal validation of teachings/beliefs" to emphasize too much agency over structure – people are actually not freely picking up the toolboxes or making their individual "à la carte" choices in a void, i.e. outside wider socio-cultural influences or power structures. Indeed, the spiritual milieu is not offering only cultural tools in a sense of techniques applied by people knowingly but also implicit norms and value systems that people are not adopting by conscious choice. However, choice and validation are relevant concepts to describe the processes that are under examination in this thesis.

4.1 Important factors for first-level confirmation: public meanings of spirituality

Although individual participants assemble their personal "spiritual toolkits", they rely on the availability of confined "symbol resources". Limitations are related to the cultural environment and to individual access to these resources (Hervieu-Léger 2006). On the one hand, availability of the sources is determined by practical means – how convenient and reachable they are –, the presence of an active core (supply side) being crucial here. On the other hand, the broader environment and meanings attributed to spirituality play a very important role. Based on the inclinations model, it could be argued that the

²² The spiritual milieu offers its own fringe- or pseudo-scientific knowledge and translates the religious-transcendent dimension into scientist language. The boundary work (Gieryn 1983) is visible in the public discourse (Study II) and especially in the symbolic fight over the naming of spirituality (see Studies IV and III).

fight over symbolic meanings are important in determining the perceived proximity of the teachings; especially when thinking about the spiritual milieu as one meaning system among others.

My research has identified struggles over the position of alternative spirituality in different contexts. New Age subculture and the spiritual milieu have been criticized for irrationality/ strange beliefs/manipulativeness by several scholars (O’Neil 2001, Carrette and King 2005) as well as activist groups called “skeptics”. Study III explores Estonian “active skeptics” as important “others” in relation to people interested in spirituality. Estonian mainstream journalists refer to the spiritual-alternative as “those topics” and consider them as something strange and even condemnable so that journalists interested in spirituality have to present spiritual topics in a careful and clever manner (Study V). Study VII demonstrates the tensions and open conflicts that surrounded Luule Viilma who was seen as a heretic in the field of medicine. Study II focuses on the understandings of spirituality on a societal level, applying Bourdieu’s concepts of fields and capitals. Here again, one key factor is the interest of dedicated participants, i.e. the core (see 3.1), to be more widely recognized.

4.2 The construction of second-level confirmation: personal experience

The spiritual milieu illustrates a shift in the perception of religiosity: people want to personally experience “transcendence” instead of mediated “sacredness” (Knoblauch 2008).²³

Similarly, New Age and spiritual teachings emphasize personal experience as the main validation mechanism (Hammer 2004, Heelas 1996), easily subverting arguments “from outside” such as the claim that spiritual practices are not scientifically plausible. This is illustrated, for example, by ultimate “self-reliance” in Douglas E. Harding’s teachings: “the only true, utterly reliable, source of authority becomes one’s own spirituality-inspired experience” (Woodhead and Heelas 2000: 123). The final evidence, therefore, does not come from outside but from one’s inner subjective feeling. Considering the centrality of the self and individual self-development, the importance of personal experience is not surprising. It must be noted though that the validation process is not the same as testing hypotheses: the aim for a spiritual or religious believer is to learn to use their senses and to increase the level of participation in order to be able to see the subjective evidence around them (see also Luhrmann 2012).

Reaching this phase of individual confirmation – especially if the person perceives a skeptical environment – is not a simple process and requires support. In the pluralistic spiritual marketplace, weakly inclined participants play

²³ Similarly to embodied spiritual techniques, we can see the proliferation of charismatic churches and spiritual teachings that include experiential elements and direct links to the supernatural (Luhrmann 2012).

with the notions of spirituality being ‘just interesting’ or ‘entertaining’. The spiritual milieu provides an environment and teachings that support individual experiencing, while making more accessible the notion of “special powers” or just unseen forces that people could perceive and use for their benefit. This is visible in the online forum of the Nest of Angels which is analyzed in Study VI, for example. Even this virtual channel encourages the readers to experience supernatural and to interpret their previous experiences as mystical or angelic.

The Estonian and broader Western cultural background plays an important role here – experiments with mental processes like trance are rare and stigmatized. “Bodily control”, in Mary Douglas’s sense (1970), is a prevailing norm, especially when it comes to mental practices²⁴. Sensory experiences (during ‘liberation breathing’ or neo-shamanic drum-session, for example) cannot usually be explained by previous knowledge as mainstream culture does not provide existing meanings for this type of experiences. Therefore, the seemingly ‘unexplainable’ experience tends to work as a strong confirmation, an irrefutable affirmation that ‘there really is something!’ and bodily sensations are the main validation mechanisms for spiritual teachings. (Study VIII)

The spiritual milieu offers trainings that guide people towards the appropriation of a “supernaturalist worldview” (Luhmann 2012) and, even more importantly, strong subjectivism. Adopting a subjectivist position might lead to the diminishing authority of the traditionally dominant institutions such as science or the government. Study VI describes how trust-based online relationships and the perceived support by angels in The Nest of Angels actualize the influence and the authority of people very much like the users themselves, and increase distrust in traditional authorities, especially those that do not accept people’s free choice and subjectivism. This goes deeper into the epistemic discussion – the spiritual milieu as a source of knowledge is not just one source among others but it constitutes its own truth position (see also Hammer 2010). This tendency is related to systematic socio-cultural insecurity and perceptions of risk and trust.

It is interesting to note that the spiritual milieu and especially the combination of ideas called conspirituality do not see themselves as having the full “burden of proof”. Several teachings that are openly critical of mainstream institutions – science, medicine or the government – assert that “alternative voices” are not expected to give fully logical answers but raise critical questions and point out “reasonable doubt”. For them, the failure to explain controversies by dominant systems means their general failure (Uibu 2016).

²⁴ As Douglas (1970) notes, this can be seen from the attitudes towards the practice of trance, both inside and outside religion. Trance as a symbolic breaking of bodily and social barriers is regarded in societies with a low level of bodily control as normal whereas in cultures with strong control it is perceived as condemnable and fearsome (Douglas 1970). In Estonia, trance or even hypnosis are rarely practiced and seem to be something scary and “abnormal”.

4.3 How personal is “personal experience”?

The pattern of personal-experience-based validation by the individual follows very liberal and individualistic understandings²⁵, although it is obvious that cultural norms direct individual decisions. Despite the *emic* ideology, the personal confirmation/validation process has a strong social dimension. As Hammer explains:

Labeled spiritual rather than religious, experiences are presented in numerous New Age texts as self-validating and primary. Thus, attention is turned away from the fact that the frame of interpretation is culturally constituted, and that ritual forms and collective practices fundamentally shape individual experience. (Hammer 2004: 366-367)

Therefore, it is not surprising that despite seemingly diverse trajectories the destinations reached by individual “spiritual seekers” are very similar. As Hammer (2010: 52) points out: “rarely is the gap separating the ideal of subjective experimentation with spiritual alternatives and the reality of a fairly homogenous discourse as striking” as in the spiritual milieu.

The typical reader of books and an occasional participant in seminars and trainings does not have a sense of belonging to a community. This, however, does not mean that readers and participants do not have guiding models or they make decisions based only on their “inner self”²⁶. Despite the allegedly private nature of experience, the spiritual milieu provides supportive structures, institutional frames for experience, as well as narratives, certain patterns of experience. Rapport and Overing explain the importance of narrative structures:

... we perceive, anticipate, remember, tell stories and moralize from them in conventional ways. Through our narrative acts we create meaning out of experience, but only in terms of pre-existing and prescriptive categories. We can but narrate ourselves in and into socio-cultural space. (2000: 288)

²⁵ From a perspective of the participants – an *emic* perspective – the teachings are radically individualistic, meaning that the structural problems are commonly interpreted as individual choices. Indeed, New Age has been criticized for being ideologically very neoliberal and putting all the blame and liability on the person’s shoulders (Carrette and King 2005).

²⁶ From a phenomenological and hermeneutic point of view it is clear that no one can experience anything as a clean slate, in the absence of pre-existing understandings and expectations. With supernatural and strongly embodied experiences this process is even clearer because of the relative visibility of the meaning-making process. A relevant example here are gender stereotypes that could be found in the spiritual milieu. Although everybody is allegedly free to choose teachings and practices that fit best his/her individual being, there is a very clear tendency to have high segregation based on gender – angels belong to women, pseudo- or quasi-scientific explorations proportionally more to men. Another example is the self-development quest itself – these standards and norms come clearly from a cultural norm of self-development (see Ziguras 2004).

According to Geertz's notion, narratives are both "models of" and "models for": a story about something that has happen becomes a template for future experiences (Geertz 1973). "Models for" are one form of cultural tool and according to Swidler's (1986) description, they can be part of a "toolkit". Narratives and stories "structure experience" and "define and illuminate inner experiences" (Bruner 1986: 6). The process of forming "an experience" is highly relevant for my research as culturally coded patterns of "an experience" are shaping further "experiencing". Although the fundamental questions about the phenomenology of experience are out of the reach of this thesis, I have explored some aspects of a social dimension of experiencing, namely its narrative constructions and social meanings surrounding experience and sensations (see Study VIII).

The New Age discourse puts an especially strong emphasis on direct experience: "something as seemingly personal as a first-hand experience becomes a privileged way of transmitting socially constructed explanations" (Hammer 2010: 62). This could be seen as a characteristic tendency for the distribution of knowledge and norms in a network society and the key factor in the process of the vernacular gaining more and more prominence compared to institutions. A critical factor for the broader social effect of this type of narrative construction is the "amplification of narratives" by the media (Mitchell 2008). Social networks and conventional forms of media – such as women's magazines (Luik 2012, Utriainen *et al.* 2012) – distribute the models efficiently. There are also some virtual communities like the Nest of Angels which are good illustrations of a "soft" institution: narrative structures are shared among each other and they serve as interpretative guides.

5. SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FINDINGS

The thesis consists of eight published articles analyzing new spirituality as a form of religiosity in a highly secular society. In tracing how the Estonian spiritual “milieu” functions as a source of cultural tools (namely spiritual knowledge or practices), the studies focus on macro-level socio-cultural issues such as the social position and meanings attributed to spirituality and alternative teachings (Studies I to V), as well as the micro perspective of why and how people use the teachings (Studies V to VIII).

5.1 The main arguments of the studies

Study I gives a broader context of the contemporary Estonian religious situation based on a wide range of survey data collected in Estonia since 1991. The majority of Estonians are not socialised into (institutional) religion, being religiously illiterate and often indifferent. There are several historical and cultural reasons for this, most notably the detachment of the Estonian national narrative from Christianity and the anti-religious programme of the Soviet Union. The Estonian example shows that, in the study of (non-)religiosity, a flexible and situational approach is needed as the majority of religious phenomena remain *outside* the conventional frames of religious commitment centred on religious belief and belonging. My co-author Atko Remmel and I chose to talk about inclinations rather than religious identities, and situativity rather than constant (non-)believing or belonging.

Study II identifies indicators of changing understandings of spiritual-alternative ideas and practices in Estonia and analyzes the tactics spiritual practitioners use to legitimize their worldviews. Based on the results of quantitative studies and qualitative interviews as well as some relevant case studies, this article suggests that a *mainstreaming* process is ongoing, which means that the visibility of alternative-spiritual ideas in mainstream media, for example, has increased. This, in turn, makes it easier for potentially interested people to cross the perceived barrier of negative connotations and become involved in the spiritual milieu, thereby fuelling the mainstreaming process further. Several central values of modern democratic societies such as plurality or individualism help to support and legitimize the spiritual milieu.

Study III focuses on the most direct opponents of the spiritual and alternative milieu, analysing the skeptics’ movement and the rhetoric of Estonian active skeptics. As spokes-people of science and rationality, skeptics are aiming to shape public opinion with regard to the meaning of spiritual and religious phenomena. In doing so, they apply several techniques such as boundary-work or pejorative naming. Estonian skeptics’ have the fiercest confrontations with the proponents of spiritual ideas. The study concludes that, although seemingly

opposite, skeptics and spiritual people have many aspects in common. Growing from the same currents of the Enlightenment, both skeptics and “spiritual people” rely on the high authority of knowledge as they strive towards a better understanding of the world and developing their intellectual-spiritual (in Estonian, there is only one term for both – *vaimne*) selves – just their trajectories and “toolboxes” are very different.

Study IV goes deeper into the questions related to the Estonian term for new spirituality – *uus vaimsus*. The study is based on an internet survey with 470 respondents involved in the spiritual milieu. Although the number of respondents who approved the term “new spirituality” was surprisingly high (56%), the qualitative analysis of people’s opinions in open questions revealed a reluctance to use the term spirituality and instead a preference for very broad and existential terms such as “life itself”, “self-creation” or “true wisdom”. The respondents rejected strongly the categorization of spirituality as a religion (less than 9% agree that new spirituality could be called that): they saw spirituality as natural and intrinsic to human beings whereas religion was said to have negative connotations of being violent, forced on people, too narrow, and oppressive. The study concludes that the terminology of contemporary spirituality is not an instrumental issue but rather an indicator of the complexity of changes religiosity itself is undergoing. The naming is also one of the central issues in the battles over the social meanings and the position of spirituality.

Study V focuses on an important vehicle for spiritual and esoteric ideas – published media. The lack of clear-cut boundaries and universal grouping principles makes it difficult to give estimations of print-run and circulation of “spiritual-alternative literature” which may include mind-body-spirit and self-help books, as well as supernatural and esoteric material. There is an increasing demand for spiritual books; spiritual or esoteric content can be found in the highest-ranked TV or radio shows, while the print-run of the edition with yearly horoscopes has been nearly double of the average print-run for the same newspaper. Despite this popularity, spirituality is seen as “alternative” and considered inappropriate and even contemptible in Estonian mainstream media. Therefore, spiritual topics have found an outlet in more specific channels like women’s and lifestyle magazines, or internet portals. The readers of spiritual books tend to describe themselves as seekers who walk on the “self-development” path avoiding explicitly religious commitments. In their motivations, some post-materialistic and counter-cultural aspects were visible – for instance, they searched for something meaningful that was otherwise missing in their lives. The study demonstrates that readers have adopted a vocabulary and reading practices as specific cultural tools.

Study VI shows how angels can become channels for providing virtual social support and creating or confirming spiritual meanings. Angels and the internet forum “the Nest of Angels” are efficient “cultural tools” to produce enchanted

meanings, values and techniques, which have found their place in people's lives. Firstly, emotional support is provided, either by fellow users of the forum directly or by confirmations that angels will definitely help the person in need. Secondly, the Nest allows people to acquire knowledge both on spiritual and practical issues. As a common pattern, people seek feedback and assurance regarding their spiritual or extraordinary experiences. The angels' divine nature both supports people directly, but more importantly, provides a language of goodness and guarantees that fellow users of the internet forum, although not real angels, are trying to be at least slightly angel-like. Angels embody power, softness and benevolence so that they are perfect symbols for legitimating values and epistemological positions of the spiritual milieu which is one major reason why they have become so popular in Estonia.

Study VII argues that health-related spiritual teachings (with their disguised religiosity) have been more effective than traditional religions in introducing religious meanings and frames in post-Soviet Estonia. As the case study of Estonian gynaecologist and spiritual teacher Luule Viilma (1950–2002) reveals, religious and spiritual elements have been the key factors of her success. Her teachings and accompanying stories reveal mysticized aspects of Viilma's personality and the religious aspects of her moral, meaning-making pursuits, as well as several principles of self-spirituality like the sacralization of the body and self. Viilma's example suggests that religious/spiritual ideas are present even in the least religious societies. Although usually latent, such principles become activated when people have specific reasons to turn to spiritual or religious sources.

Study VIII explores the role of the body and bodily sensations for new spirituality. Participation in alternative medical and spiritual practices increases people's bodily awareness, making the body more "present". The teachings of new spirituality often emphasize the role of the body and bodily sensations. For example, in some teachings, the body has something that can be seen as its own "consciousness" and/or "language" that mediates the "inner" and "natural" knowledge. Practitioners try to establish a dialogue with the body, to hear its voice and interpret its signs properly. The body is seen as an "intelligent" partner, dissolving the rigid dualism of the mind as a conscious subject and the body as a material object. Based on fieldwork observations, in-depth interviews and conversations as well as an internet-based questionnaire, the study observed the different roles the body and body-communication play in the Estonian spiritual milieu. The use of spiritual practices as cultural tools often leads to different types of body-awareness and conceptualizations of the body. New spirituality offers both the physical means and specific meanings for embodied experiences and understandings of the role of the body – embodied experiences are also the key element in validating the efficacy of the practices.

5.2 General conclusion based on research questions

In addition to the specific research problems of the separate studies, the introductory chapter provides the background, poses more general research questions concerning new spirituality and situational low-intensity religious involvement, and offers a **theoretical framework and (meta)analysis of the studies**. After reviewing and adjusting the theories and concepts of religion and spirituality to my material on the Estonian religious situation, I have created a model that describes contemporary religious and spiritual involvement and some characteristics of participation. My studies were guided by five central questions concerning new spirituality as a religious phenomenon.

The first cluster of research questions is related to the definition of New Age spirituality: **How to conceptualize new spirituality? Could it be analyzed as a coherent phenomenon?**

My thesis has analyzed conceptualizations of new spirituality from an emic perspective (Study IV), the skeptical outsiders' position (Study III), and a scholarly perspective (section 1.3 and Study IV). Due to the fluidity and elusiveness of the phenomenon, as well as the contestations related to spirituality, definitions remain vague and context-specific, in the absence of a universally accepted terminological consensus. Based on the empirical material, the most accurate description seems to be that of a *spiritual milieu* – an approach that looks at new spirituality as an environment, a ground for the playing out of different teachings. Similarly, it brings out the importance of infrastructure for the disseminating of spiritual practices and beliefs/knowledge. To refer to the phenomenon, I have used mostly the terms “new spirituality” (the direct translation of the term – *uus vaimsus* – is also used in Estonian), “New Age spirituality,” or just “spirituality”. My studies point out the strong need for new terminology as well as the difficulties related to finding one (Study IV).

Conceptualizations may often seem to be misleading as New Age spirituality is not a coherent religion, but rather consists of cultural tools distributed in a spiritual milieu and used with different intensities by participants, in various contexts and situations. Spiritual tools that are functional and situational commonly operate in “secular” spheres and are associated (due to their vocabulary or functioning principles) to different areas of life such as science, medicine, or the economy. Participation in a spiritual milieu is dynamic and usually does not involve obligations and/or stable belonging. However, despite both *emic* and scholarly depictions of New Agers as individual seekers who autonomously “pick and mix” from a wide variety of ideas to create their own custom-made beliefs and practices, there are numerous basic principles and much more normativity in the milieu than what transpires from the discourse. For example, people share fundamental understandings of individual self-development or the principles described by “perennism” (see page 19–20); there is also surprisingly high homogeneity of vocabulary, aesthetics or symbolism (Hammer 2010). Several values and understandings in the spiritual milieu are supported by and

blended with the cultural norms that are perceived as “secular” and are not related to the spiritual (such as the emphasis on individual authority or the value of individualistic self-development). Although these factors make it more difficult to see new spirituality as a coherent and distinctively *religious* phenomenon – it actually contributes to the social and cultural significance of religiosity as its tools are easily applied by a wider range of people than those willing to identify themselves as spiritual or religious.

Second, my studies have shown **why the explanations or techniques made available by the spiritual milieu are being favoured by my respondents. Why is the spiritual milieu meeting the expectations of so many Estonians?**

Although it is difficult to estimate the actual popularity of new spirituality in Estonia, the increasing visibility and slight changes in its social positioning indicate a mainstreaming process driven by increasing demand for these teachings and principles (see Study II). Commonly, participation in the spiritual milieu is goal-orientated and motivated by the need to find solutions for specific needs (such as health-problems, loss of job), or just manifested as a wish to experience (new) meanings, find new life-goals or an alternative lifestyle (often triggered by the general dissatisfaction with the mainstream). Drawing on the examples offered by the studies, I showed how the readers of spiritual mind-body-spirit themed books are strongly motivated by the perceived need to explore life to the fullest, including its spiritual dimensions (Study V). Another example comes from the Nest of Angels internet discussion forum where both the fellow users and angels exercise strong therapeutic properties for the members of this online community (Study VI).

I proposed several arguments why low-intensity religious involvements have gained more prominence in Estonia. Whereas some aspects – such as individualism and consumerism – are universal to secular societies in general, some other aspects arise from the specific cultural context of Estonia. For example, the presence and high impact of non-theistic folk beliefs have always featured in the questionnaires, ever since the first surveys which were conducted at the beginning of the 90s (Study I). The thick layer of effective folk beliefs and practices in Estonia (related to divination or healing, for example) have provided a fertile ground for the appropriation of New Age-type of spiritual teachings as well.

The success of the spiritual milieu is also indebted to its organizational forms: operating rather in a format of competing cultural tools without requiring participants to commit to institutions or imposing obligations on them (which is common to religions). Therefore, spiritual teachings fit better with the individualistic logic of autonomous individuals in a consumer society.

The third question that I address in this thesis is related to **the modes of participation: how do people participate in the spiritual milieu and become involved?**

The Estonian example – with its low level of religious belief or belonging – makes it obvious that scholars should also focus on those people who are not “members”, “followers”, or “committed believers” but have only some “inclination” to use spiritual solutions in certain situations. For example, people with only *weak inclination to spirituality* have mostly latent beliefs in some spiritual principles like vital life energies or karma; they may have experienced something from the spiritual milieu but are not constant practitioners of any spiritual techniques or dedicated followers of the principles. This type of involvement has often been left out from the religious studies perspective. To grasp the broad influence of spirituality I proposed a model depicting how close or far spiritual tools are for people mentally/attitudinally: this approach helps to understand religiosity in terms of inclinations to believe and to turn to spiritual or religious solutions rather than supposedly constant believing or belonging (Ch 3.2).

The Estonian religious situation provides good examples of inclination-type of “belonging” and different patterns of how people turn to spiritual or religious solutions. Situational participation assumes the willingness to use solutions from the spiritual milieu. Being critical of approaches that aim to describe fixed modes of participation, my research has shown the benefits of focusing on the essentially gradual nature of becoming spiritually involved. This is especially relevant in the context of weak primary socialization into religions and the presence of hostile public representations (see Studies II and III). With its situational and goal-oriented nature, involvement in the spiritual milieu resembles consumption. However, actually beginning to use spiritual tools (teachings, practices) requires some practical and attitudinal preparedness and initial willingness to try the solutions from the spiritual milieu. Spiritual events and personal or mediated guidance (internet pages, books, consultations) provide support for the first steps in experiencing spirituality.

Therefore, with weaker institutional support and less structured processes than in the case of institutional religions, the validation process is commonly multi-layered and individualistic. The evidence supporting the efficacy of the teachings, such as success-stories and more abstract arguments like scientism or traditions, create the trust that is essential for people to begin to use (and to test themselves) the teachings. My studies confirm the idea that personal experiences (bodily sensations, visions, personal healing history) are crucial for finding (personal) validation of the practices (Study VIII).

The steps of becoming involved in the spiritual milieu (Chapters 3 and 4) are helpful key-points in an analysis of spirituality from a social-scientific perspective. The model I described applies best to the context of perceived skepticism which is still present in Estonia but the advancing mainstreaming process of spirituality may change that quite rapidly.

The focus on individual appropriation of spirituality raises questions about its social dimensions and functioning. Fourth general research question observes **the distribution of spirituality. What are the institutions/structures that support the existence of the spiritual milieu?**

In the absence of strong church-type institutions, there are several other factors that contribute to the proliferation of spirituality. Free-market competition has proven to function rather well in the spiritual milieu: professional practitioners are “stimulating demand” by catering to the needs of individuals and by providing innovation and a constant supply of new teachings. With technological and social transformation, the required forms of institutional support have changed. Different types of media (books, online media) and information dissemination platforms (like events’ databases, internet forums for sharing experiences) offer better opportunities to keep the inclinations alive than traditional institutional structures such as churches.

The key for the success of the dissemination of spirituality are the narratives which function as both “model of” and “model for”. Memorized as stories about personal spiritual experiences (models “of”), they work also as “models for” – they establish templates for structuring people’s experiences (e.g. what to feel or see during breathing sessions). These stories and arguments are shared in the media and/or lectures/seminars as necessary guidelines for individualistic experiencing.

The public-private distinction has increasingly lost its relevance as virtual and informal channels for vernacular content are often stronger and have a wider scope and influence than religious institutions (churches, for instance). Instead of explicit power structures implemented by institutions, ideologies and norms have been shared in more subtle ways as demonstrated in the thesis (see section 4.3 and Studies VIII or II). In these new “institutions” – such as thematic Facebook groups, for example – the lines between “soft” and “hard” or “alternative” and “dominant” are blurred; e.g. can a Facebook group even be considered an institution?; how are the power relations and normative frames played out? Conventional distinctions between *hard* (institutions, explicit power) and *soft* (values, stories, cultural tools) might be misleading as the institutionalized *soft* means have a stronger impact on people’s beliefs and behaviours than dominant institutions. Participants are themselves producing and strengthening the tools (e.g. by sharing the stories of their experiences and suggestions). As vernacular networks play a key role, the categories of “dominant” and “vernacular” are losing their relevance. Similarly to the media, for example, religion has developed new types of institutions – network based and less centrally organized, although still clearly structured by internal rules, normativity and power relations.

The last category of questions is related to more general implications for the discipline and spirituality in the context of religious studies: **How to understand spirituality in comparison to religions and in the context of the study of religions? What kind of implications does the phenomenon of new spirituality have for the discipline?**

The discussion whether it is justified and accurate to use the term “religion” in describing New Age type of spiritualities is still ongoing. Considering the disciplinary background of religious studies or sociology/ anthropology of reli-

gion, this is a complicated question closely related to the identity of the scholarly field itself. Because of the sharp rejection of the concept of religion by *emic* understandings (Study IV), the labelling of new spirituality as religion is very problematic.

Without an initial aim to address the disciplinary concerns for religious studies, my analysis pointed out some critical aspects for the discipline as well (see Studies I and II). I agree with Paul Heelas' argument that Estonian empirical material strongly suggests that "traditional disciplinary boundaries – specifically those which revolve around 'religion' – should be relegated to history" (2013: 195). While allegedly one of the least religious countries in the world, the Estonian case clearly shows the need to reject a narrow understanding of religion in order to detect and understand the full range and depth of contemporary religions including "situational" or "low intensity" religiosities. There is still a strong need to find better concepts to describe the involvement and functioning of the spiritual milieu. My studies indicate that the use of the concept of "religion" tends to come with (often implicit) assumptions of greater coherence of the phenomena than they actually have. Therefore, I suggested that the term "religion" is often misleading in countries like Estonia and proposed to use instead more flexible and less loaded terms such as "cultural tools", "toolkit", and "inclinations". The tendency of "lived" and "popular" religion to become increasingly dominant through mediated social networks like Facebook groups or internet discussion forums is a challenge for scholars to find better tools to study situational participation which is played out mostly through informal networks.

6. SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Üha suurem osa religioossetest nähtustest jääb Lääne sekulaarsetes ühiskondades väljapoole institutsionaalseid religioone. Rahvusvahelistes uuringutes mitte-religioossete riikide tippu kuuluv Eesti on selle tendentsi silmapaistev näide. Institutsionaalse religiooni madalale tähtsusele vaatamata on siin esindatud paljud religioossetes-vaimsed uskumused ja praktikad (näiteks usk „kõrgemasse vaimu või elujõudu“), mis ei kuulu otseselt ühegi religiooni alla ning mida toetab põhiosas New Age'i subkultuurist välja kasvanud uue vaimsuse keskkond. Uue vaimsuse keskkonnas levivad erinevad õpetused nagu vabastav hingamine, pendliga ennustamine või rännakud inglite ja üksisarvikutega. Et taoliste õpetuste järgmine ei eelda püsivat kuulumist mingisse kogudusse või isegi mitteformaalsesse gruppi ning õpetused ise hõlmavad väga erinevaid valdkondi, on uut vaimsust väga keeruline määratleda või analüüsida lähtudes tavapärastest religiooni indikaatoritest nagu uskumused, kuuluvus (religioosne identiteet) või religioossed praktikad.

Doktoritöös vaatlen uue vaimsuse keskkonda eelkõige kui üht allikat, mis pakub erinevaid kultuurilisi tööriistu nii maailma mõtestamiseks kui ka konkreetsete probleemide nagu haiguse või töökaotuse puhul abi ja toetuse saamiseks. Taolised kultuurilised tööriistad võivad olla nii abstraktsemad väärtused, tähendused (sh ka eksistentsiaalse maailmakorralduse kohta) aga ka näiteks spetsiifilised tehnikad või rituaalid „rahaõnne“ kasvatamiseks, „aja maha võtmiseks“ vms. Iseloomulik on religioosse ja mittereligioosse läbipõimumine, kus religioosne on tugevalt seotud või otseselt rakendatud siinpoolse teenistusse. Samas eeldab ka näiteks erinevate „energiate“ kasutamine usku, et maailmas toimivad mingid erilised või üleloomulikud jõud. Oma uuringutes lähtun religiooni laiast käsitlusest: religioon on kultuurisüsteem, mille üheks elemendiks on materialistlikus tähenduses seletamatu jõu, välja või olendi kohalolu tunnustamine, mis aga ei pruugi olla selle nähtuse kese. Samas on vaimsete õpetuste jaoks üldjuhul tähtis ka eksistentsialistlik ja transtsendentne dimensioon, kus luuakse mõtestatud taju maailmast ja indiviidist selles.

Doktoritöö koosneb kaheksast publikatsioonist ning uuringuid omavahel siduvatest, konteksti loovatest ning üldisemaid järeldusi välja toovatest sissejuhatavatest peatükkidest. Lisaks spetsiifilisematele ala-eesmärkidele, mis tõusetusid erinevates uuringutes, on minu töö üldisemad eesmärgid järgnevad.

- Anda ülevaade ning analüüsida erinevaid teoreetilisi ja kontseptuaalseid lähenemisi ning nendega seotud väljakutseid religioossuse kirjeldamisel Eesti-taolises post-institutsionaalse religioossusega riigis.
- Kirjeldada uue vaimsuse keskkonnas osalemise ning uue vaimsuse pakutavast osasaamise viise situatiivse ja mitteaktiivse religioosse osaluse spetsiifikast lähtudes.
- Mõtestada uue vaimsuse miljöoga seotust (ja seotuks saamist) eelkõige osalejate perspektiivist. Mõista osalejate jaoks toimivaid õpetuste ja praktikatele usutavuse loomise ja valideerimise viise ning eriti avalikus kom-

munikatsioonis toimuvaid alternatiivsete ja vaimsete ideede legitimeerimise protsesse, mis kujundavad vaimsuse ühiskondlikke tähendusi ja positsiooni.

Järgnevalt annan ülevaate põhijäreldustest uuringute üldisemal analüüsil kerkinud viie põhiteema ning nende kohta tõstatatud uurimisküsimuste alusel ning seejärel teen lühikokkuvõtte töö sisalduvate publikatsioonide põhijäreldustest.

1) Kuidas uut vaimsust määratleda?

Uus vaimsus koondab katusmõistena erinevaid õpetusi ning seda on keeruline ühese nähtusena määratleda: küsimus ei ole pelgalt uue vaimsuse enda raskesti piiritletavas ning defineeritavas olemuses, vaid ka erinevates positsioonides, millelt seda saab vaadelda ja defineerida. Uue vaimsuse nimetamisega seonduvad kõhkklused ja vaidlused viitavad nii nähtuse erinevatele mõistmise viisidele kui ka laiematele muutustele religiooni suhtumises. Vaimsuse järgijate pakutud määratlustest tuleb hästi välja vastajate endi eemiline (*emic*) arusaam vaimsuse olemusest – seda nähakse inimesekeskse, avara ja võimsana, milleni jõutakse vabalt ja sundimata. Uue vaimsusega tegelejad püüavad vaimsuse mõiste kaudu seda legitimeerida, näidata seda eksistentsiaalse ja olulisena, millele vastandub skeptikute püüd kasutada nähtust pigem halvustavaid või seda kitsastesse piiridesse seadvaid nimetusi.

Uue vaimsuse keskkonnas levivad õpetused ei ole tingimata religioossed ning nende religioonina käsitlemine on mitmes mõttes ka problemaatiline. Näiteks reiki energiatega ravimine või suuresti füüsilised-sportlikud tegevused nagu jooga ei seostu enamiku praktikute jaoks religioossete ega isegi mitte eksistentsiaalsete või pühalikkusele viitavate tähendustega. Töös analüüsitud empiiriline materjal illustreeribki piiride tõmbamise keerukust, mis avaldub religioosse ja sekulaarse põimumises. Samas eeldab uue vaimsuse keskkonna pakutavate tööriistade kasutamine teatavate aluspõhimõtete (näiteks nn perennialismi ideede) aktsepteerimist või ka usku (või vähemalt aktsepteerimist), et maailmas eksisteerivad mingid laiemad meta-empiriilised jõud, mis on aluseks näiteks mittefüüsilise energiaga seotud praktikatele või laiema spirituaalse korra jaoks.

Olen kasutanud oma uuringutes valdavalt mõistet *uus vaimsus*, mis on ka eestikeelses kirjanduses nüüdseks üpris tugevalt juurdunud. Sisuliselt sobib hästi uue vaimsuse määratlemine mingi keskkonna või miljöona, kus levivad erinevad õpetused – seega on õigustatud ka mõisted *uue vaimsuse keskkond* või *miljöö*. Uuringus IV, milles analüüsin põhjalikumalt just uue vaimsusega kokku puutunud inimeste arusaamu uuest vaimsusest kui nähtusest, jõudsin järeldusele, et analüütiliselt oleks mõistlik kasutada tavakeelest pärinevatest (ning tähenduslikult laetud) mõistetest eristuvaid mõisteid.

2) Miks uue vaimsuse poole pöörduetakse ja seda järgitakse?

Ehkki uue vaimsuse ühiskondliku olulisuse kohta on keeruline anda ammendavat ülevaadet, võib täheldada selle nähtavuse kasvu, mida võib pidada ka märgiks selle peavoolustumisest (Uuring II). Uue vaimsuse keskkonnas

osalemine ei pea olema järjepidev, õpetuste kasutamisel ning osalemisel on sageli konkreetsed eesmärgid, näiteks soov leida lahendust konkreetsele probleemile tervise või suhetega või ka lihtsalt tajutud vajadus saada maailma kohta teada midagi uut, leida uusi eesmärgi elus või proovida teistsugust elustiili (viimased võivad olla seotud mõningase pettumisega või lihtsalt aja ja võimaluste tekkimisega). Doktoritöö uuringud illustreerivad vaimsuse funktsionaalsust erinevate näidete toel: olgu see raamatutest saadud ideede kaudu elu ümbermõtestamine (Uuring VII) või inglite ning vaimsuse pakutavate tähenduste abil eluraskustega hakkamasaamine (Uuring VI).

Uue vaimsuse keskkond sobib situatiivseks osaluseks oma toimimisviisi ja struktuuri poolest väga hästi, pakkudes erinevaid lahendusi justkui tööriistu ning mitte eeldades pikaajalisi kohustusi või pühendumist. Taoline „madala aktiivsusega“ religioosne osalus ning situatiivne seotus sobivad individualistliku ning konsumeristliku kultuuriga, mis on aidanud kaasa uue vaimsuse levikule Läänemaailmas laiemalt. Samas võib Eesti puhul välja tuua ka mõned kultuuri-spetsiifilised uue vaimsuse levikut ja õpetuste juurdumist toetavad tunnused nagu näiteks rahvauskumuste järjepidev kohalolu (Uuring I).

3) Kuidas toimub uue vaimsuse keskkonnas osalemine?

Eesti uue vaimsuse keskkond illustreerib hästi tänapäeva religioossuse situatiivseid osalusmustreid: uskumuste/teadmiste latentselt foonilt toimub vajaduspõhine aktiveerumine. Osaluskogemus kasvatab tõenäosust edaspidi osalemiseks ning võib kujundada ka laiemalt elustiili, maailmavaadet (näiteks läbi spetsiifiliste infokanalite). Eesti materjal viitab vajadusele leida uut terminoloogiat ja mudeleid osaluse mõtestamiseks ja kirjeldamiseks. Nii pakkusin uuringute analüüsil välja mudeli, mis püüab võtta arvesse, et osalus ei ole üldiselt stabiilne ning inimestel on pigem teatav valmisolek või kalduvus uue vaimsuse keskkonnast pärit lahendusi kasutada. Selle lähenemise kohaselt ei ole erineva intensiivsusega osalejad adekvaatne kirjeldada mitte läbi stabiilsete osalusmääratluste nagu „täielik osaleja“ vms, vaid pigem iseloomustada erinevate kogemuste ja uskumuste pinnalt tekkinud (nii mentaalset kui praktilist) valmisolekut vaimseid tehnikaid omaks võtta ja katsetada. See skeem aitab mõtestada ka uue vaimsuse levikut ja nn ulatust – seda, kui kaugel asuvad inimesed nii oma hoiakutelt ja kogemustelt uue vaimsuse keskkonnast tulenevatest lahendustest ja ideedest. Illustratiivsel osaluse ringskeemil on võimalik kujutada erineva seotusega inimesi alates uue vaimsuse tuumast ehk inimestest, kelle jaoks uue vaimsuse keskkond on töökohaks ning üheks elustiili põhikujundajaks, kuni kõige nõrgemalt seotud inimeste ehk potentsiaalsete huvilisteni, kel on vaid teatav valmisolek spirituaalseid ja alternatiivseid lahendusi vajadusel kasutada. Kui tüüpiliselt saavad tähelepanu vaid osalejad, siis oma töös jõuan järeldusele, et uue vaimsuse tegeliku ühiskondliku resonantsi ja tähenduse tabamiseks tuleks analüüsi kaasata ka neid, kel on ehk vaid mõningad (latentsed) uskumused ning üldine valmisolek õpetuste poole pöörduda.

Ehkki nõudluse-pakkumise ja turu-mudelid kirjeldavad religioosset või vaimset „turuplatssi“ mingites aspektides adekvaatselt, vajab eraldi tähelepanu

just nende lahenduste spetsiifikast tulenev omaksvõtmise protsess – õpetuste järgima hakkamine ei ole instrumentaalne tarbimine, kus otsus langetatakse puhtalt näiteks hinna vm „toote omaduste“ alusel. Kõige olulisemaks peetakse isiklikku kogemust, mis kinnitab igaühele personaalselt õpetuse tõeväärtuse ja toimivuse. Rolli mängib siiski ka laiem tähenduslik foon, mis loob valmisoleku ning tekitab „tõelisuse aura“, mis paneb inimesi neid lahendusi-tehnikaid piisavalt usaldama, et neid ka ise järele proovida. Selleks on vajalik, et barjäärid (tajutud stigmatiseeritus, õpetuste vähene nähtavus) inimese jaoks vähenevad või kaovad (Uuring II).

4) Kuidas uus vaimsus levib, millised on sellega kaasnenud institutsionaalsed muutused?

Tavapärase institutsionaalse struktuuri puudumine muudab uue vaimsuse ning selle levikukanalid dünaamilisemaks. Raamatud, meedia ja eriti internet töötavad kultuuriliste tööriistade levitamisel efektiivselt, ehk isegi paremini kui konventsionaalsed (religioossed) institutsioonid. Uue vaimsuse keskkonnaga tugevalt seotud ning sealt oma sissetuleku saavad praktikud aitavad pideva pakku-misega stimuleerida nõudlust. Taoline panustamine ei tähenda sageli täiskohaga töötamist ning eriti virtuaalsetes kogukondades toodavad sisu küllalt lai hulk kasutajaid.

Uue vaimsuse keskkonnas levivad teadmised sageli narratiivses vormis, eelkõige personaalsete kogemuslugudena. Vaatamata näiliselt individuaalsele vabadusele enda tee otsimisel ja lahenduste leidmisel, on lugude jutustamise struktuurid ja kesksed elemendid küllaltki universaalsed, mis viitab keskkonna sisemisele normatiivsusele. Uue vaimsuse levikukanalite efektiivsus illustreerib vernakulaarse ja dominantse dünaamika muutumist – ehkki võimusuhted ning võimu ja ekspertsuse konstrueerimine ei ole kuhugi kadunud, on tavaline kasu-tajakogemus läbi virtuaalsete võrkude muutunud üha olulisemaks struktuuriks, mis õpetusi kannab, nende kasutamist toetab ning usaldusväärsust loob. Verna-kulaarsest on saanud uus dominantne, sest individuaalsetel valikutel põhineva religioossuse kandjana on traditsioonilise struktuuriga institutsioonid halvemas positsioonis kui mitteformaalsed vahetumad võrgustikud.

5) Milliseid väljakutseid esitab uus vaimsus religiooniuuringutele?

Uue vaimsuse käsitlemine on arvestatav väljakutse religiooniuuringute distsipliinile, mis oma identiteedist tulenevalt on keskendunud pigem institutsionaalsete religioonide ja traditsiooniliste religiooni tunnuste nagu näiteks kuuluvus/identiteedid, uskumused ja praktikad uurimisele. Kahtlemata on uue vaimsuse poole kaldumise tuvastamine keeruline, ent selles suunas on vähemalt Eesti post-institutsionaalses religioosses situatsioonis vajalik püüelda ning seda rohkem arvesse võtta.

Eraldi küsimus on religiooni mõiste probleemsus. Arvestades Eesti uue vaimsusega tegelejate vastumeelsust religiooni mõiste suhtes ning religiooni tähendusvälja ja ajaloolist tausta ka teadusuuringutes, tekib kõhklikus uue vaimsuse taoliste nähtuste religioonina käsitlemise põhjendatusest. Samas on

religiooniuuringud või religioonianthropoloogia ja -sotsioloogia juba oma distsiplinaarselt taustalt alalhoidlikud radikaalsemate muutuste suhtes. Ka enda uuringus olen siiski lähtunud religiooni mõistest ning religiooniuuringute distsiplinaarsest taustast, defineerides religiooni ja vaimsust küll funktsionaalselt ja väga laialt. Jõuan siiski oma töö tulemusel seisukohale, et on võimalik – ja vajalik – käsitleda uut vaimsust ühe tähendust loova süsteemina teiste seas, väärtuste, kultuuriliste praktikate kandjana, mis ei ole iseenesest religiooni-spetsiifiline ning mille puhul ongi religiooni või sellest väljapoole jääva vahele piiri tõmbamine pea võimatu. Ehkki tõsine väljakutse religiooniuurijatele, tuleneb see vajadus selgelt siinsest religioosest olukorrast.

Toodud põhijäreldused toetuvad kaheksale empiirilisele originaaluuringule.

Esimeses uuringus analüüsin kaasaator Atko Rummeliga Eesti religioosset konteksti laiemalt, pakkudes selgitusi eestlaste religioonileigusele. Enamik eestlasi ei ole religioonidega kokku puutunud ega saanud religiooni-alast haridust, iseloomulik on madal religioosne kirjaoskus (teadmised religioonidest) ning üldine ükskõiksus. Nende nähtuste kultuurilis-ajaloolisteks põhjusteks võib pidada kristluse vähest tähtsust Eesti rahvuslikus narratiivis (või isegi vaenulikkust kristluse suhtes) ning religioonivastast programmi Nõukogude Liidus. Seetõttu paikneb Eestis enamik religioosseid nähtusi väljaspool konventsionaalset arusaama religioossetest uskumustest ja kuuluvusest. Et tabada religioossuse tegelikku ulatust ning mitte vähendada selle ühiskondlikku mõju, tuleb arvestada täpsemalt ka mitte-religioossete inimeste gruppi ning situatiivset osalust, mitte vaid harjumuspäraseid religioosseid identiteete (nagu näiteks ateist, uue vaimsuse järgija või kristlane).

Teises uuringus vaatlen spirituaalseid ja alternatiivseid ideid ning praktikaid ümbritsevate tähenduste ja arusaamade muutumist. Mitmed näited ning uuringumaterjal viitavad uue vaimsuse peavoolustumisele, mis tähendab, et vaimsuse teemad on peavoolumeedias üha rohkem nähtaval. Tugevam ühiskondlik positsioon annab vaimsusest huvitatutele õpetusi toetavaid argumente, mistõttu on rohkematel inimestel tõenäosus hakata keskkonnas osalema. Uue vaimsuse ühiskondliku positsiooni ümber võib näha ka mitmeid võitlusi. Alternatiivse sfääri eestkõnelejad viitavad oma positsiooni legitimeerimisel näiteks mitmetele ühiskonnas aktsepteeritud väärtustele nagu pluralism või inimeste vaba valik.

Kolmandas uuringus vaatlen aktiivseid skeptikuid, kes kasutavad üle maailma küllalt universaalseid võtteid teadusliku teadmise tõe monopoli kaitseks. Keskkel kohal on nägemus piiride tähtsusest, et hoida ära teaduse autoriteetsuse kasutamist „ebateaduslike“ praktikate poolt. Teadust ebateadusest eristavat piiri kujutavad skeptikud kindla ja objektiivsena, ebateadusliku järgimine peaks nende arvates olema tajutud stigmatiseerituna. Skeptikute teravaim vastandus ilmneb vaimsuse valdkonnas aktiivselt tegutsevate inimestega, kellega ollakse paradoksaalselt mitmetes aspektides aga hoopis sarnased. Teineteise konstrueerimisel kasutatakse sarnaseid retoorilisi skeeme. Mõlemad grupid näevad end mõistlike ja kriitilistena, tunnustades teadmiste väärtuslikkust ning

nähes vajadust ja võimalust püüelda vaimse arengu poole. Suur osa uusvaimsest keskkonnast ning uusususunditest ammutab jõudu samast algpõhimõttest, mis skeptikudki – empiirilise katsetamise loogikast ning teaduse/teadmise kõrgest sotsiaalsest autoriteedist.

Neljandas uuringus analüüsin uue vaimsuse käsitlusviise. Ehkki uuringu aluseks olnud küsitlusest (n=470) selgub, et uue vaimsuse mõiste on vaimsusega kokku puutunud inimeste seas aktsepteeritud, tuleb kvalitatiivse materjali analüüsil välja, et nimetamist ei peeta soovitavaks või eelistatakse muid termineid. Uue vaimsuse mõistesse suhtumine ning erinevate nimetamisviiside suur variatiivsus vihjab, et ühest ning üldiselt aktsepteeritavat ja ka tavakeeles kasutusel olevat mõistet on nähtuse jaoks ilmselt pea võimatu leida. Uuring näitab ka laiemalt vaimsuse mõistega seonduva põhjal sügavamaid tendentse suhtumises teistspoollusesse. Vaimsuse mõiste kasutamine universaalse jõu tähenduses võimaldab loobuda tänapäevases inimesekeskses ning loodusteaduslikus tähendussüsteemis Jumalast kui agendist. Kõrgem jõud eksisteerib sellise taju kohaselt oma olemuselt pigem kui loodusseadus, mingi füüsikaline printsiip, mis mõjutab inimesi ja mida võib enda huvides ära kasutada, kuid mis ei kontrolli, mille nõudmistega ei pea igapäevaselt arvestama. Institutsionaalse religiooni asemel nähakse vajalikuna pigem nn maagilisele mõtlemisele toetuvat maailma mõtestamise viisi ning ka konkreetseid praktikaid.

Viies uuring vaatlleb raamatuid ja meediat kui uue vaimsuse olulisi levitajaid. Nende kanalite kesksusele viitavad erinevad näitajad nagu kõrge laenutuste arv raamatukogus, mitmete vaimsete ja alternatiivsete raamatute suured müüginumbrid ning teemade aktiivne kajastamine meedias, ehkki valdavalt on selliste teemade koht ikkagi spetsiifilistes kanalites nagu foorumid või teemaportaalid. Intervjuudest raamatute lugejatega ilmneb, et uue vaimsuse kirjandus võimaldab mõtiskleda oma elu ja maailma üle, leida oma probleemidele ja elu sündmustele uutmoodi tähendusi. Intervjueeritud lugejad kirjeldavad lugemist otsimisena, mis muudab elu tähenduslikumaks ning ka lihtsalt põnevamaks. Samuti on lugejad omaks võtnud uue vaimsuse mõisteid ning spetsiifilisi lugemispraktikaid nagu näiteks raamatutest üksikute enda kohta käivate õpetuste leidmine.

Kuuendas uuringus analüüsitav Inglipesa foorum näitlikustab tänapäevaste inglükujutelmade rolli uue vaimsuse keskkonnas. Sümbolitena või ka tajutud reaalse agentidena suudavad inglid võtta foorumi kasutajate jaoks sobilikke tähendusi; nende toel täidab Inglipesa olulisi funktsioone – pakub raskel hetkel tuge, võimaldab tunda seotust ja heasoovlikkust, samuti loob ja kinnitab argisundis tähenduslikku. Inglid on foorumis kujunenud uue vaimsuse kesksete väärtuste (nagu individualistliku enese-arengu müüt; holistiline ja hooliv suhtumine maailma ja inimesse) ning maailmaga suhestumise viiside (nagu subjektiivismi või seostava teadmise) kandmisel ja legitimeerimisel oluliseks sümboliks ja toeks. Inglipesa kui aktiivne virtuaalne keskkond võimaldab vaadelda online-suhtlusel põhineva tugigrupi toimimist ning vaimsete-religioossete tähenduste loomist.

Seitsmendas uuringus näitan, kuidas tervisega seonduvad teemad on olnud Eestis konvensionaalsest religioonist tõhusamad religioossete ja vaimsete

tähenduste ning seoste pakkumisel. Artikkel keskendub religioossetele ja vaimsetele elementidele tuntud günekoloogi ja vaimse õpetaja Luule Viilma elus ja õpetustes. Viilma sensitiivsed, üleloomulikud võimed ja kogemused on oluline osa tema kuvandis ning tema kui isiku müstifitseerimine aidanud kaasa pärandist. Oma õpetuses paneb Viilma kokku elemente nii kristlusest, Ida religioonidest ja uuest vaimsusest, andes haigustele ning kehalistele tundmus-tele laiemat moraalse tähenduse. Viilma kui taasiseseisvunud Eesti kindlasti ühe enim-tiražeeritud autori populaarsus näitab, et religioosne dimensioon on tegelikult ka eestimaalaste jaoks oluline, taoliste pigem varjatud religioosse dimensiooniga õpetuste poole pööratakse aga eelkõige just rasketes olukor-dades või otsides lahendusi konkreetsetele probleemidele.

Kaheksas uuring tegeleb uue vaimsuse jaoks väga olulise kehalisuse dimensiooniga: näiteks õpetatakse inimesi oma keha paremini tunnetama või aidatakse luua kehaga usaldusväärset partnerlus- või sõbrasuhet. Keha kuulates loodavad inimesed tervislikumalt elada või vältida nähtamatuid ja keeruliselt tuvastatavaid riske, ent keha võib osutada ka inimese käitumise valvuriks ja kontrollijaks, kui näiteks haigust mõtestatakse märguande või keha sõnumina teatud käitumis- või mõtlemisviisi muutmiseks. Seeläbi kujundab uus vaimsus laiemalt ja fundamentaalsemalt inimeste elumaailmu ning avaldub muuhulgas näiteks muutunud kehatajus, mis saavutatakse kehaga suhtlemise ja keha impulsside tõlgendamise abil. Vaimsete tehnikate proovimisel saadavad kehalised-sensoorsed tundmused on ühtlasi õpetuste toimivuse kinnitajad, mis uue vaimsuse individualistlikku osalusviisi arvestades on väga oluline. Samuti võib osalejate puhul täheldada, et keha parem tunnetamine ja kehaga saadud „kontakt“ on oluliseks argumendiks vaimsete praktikate-õpetustega jätkamiseks.

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2005–2009 University of Tartu, media and communication studies program, MA in social sciences
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